



BLACKHAVEN BRIDES
BOOK ONE

THE WICKED BARON

MARY LANCASTER

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE IMPERIAL SEASON*

The Wicked Baron

Blackhaven Brides

Book One

Mary Lancaster



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Mary Lancaster's Newsletter

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About Mary Lancaster

Orphan, Gillie Muir, makes ends meet by holding genteel card parties for friends and visitors to the newly fashionable spa town of Blackhaven. But when Lord Wickenden, known as the Wicked Baron, makes her a shocking proposal, her world is turned upside down.

Jaded and bored, Lord Wickenden has his own reasons for joining the house party at Braithwaite Castle. One of them is to oblige an ex-mistress by detaching her son from the local gaming den hussy who has ensnared him. But, confronted by Gillie's unexpected charm and innocence, Wickenden abandons his original plan of simply taking her for himself.

Instead, he becomes embroiled in her bizarre problems, which include saving her reputation and her life, keeping the Watch away from her card parties, and hiding an injured smuggler who was once kind to her.

The infuriating and devastating Wickenden soon has Gillie's heart in a spin. But when she discovers he means to fight a duel over her – and everyone knows the wicked baron never misses – she'll go to any length to save his life and his soul. Even elope with another man.

The Wicked Baron is the first in the Blackhaven Brides series, set in a newly fashionable spa town on the beautiful Cumbrian coast, where the great and the bad of visiting Regency society turn local life upside down.

Chapter One

SMUGGLER JACK HAD undoubtedly been shot. Gillie stared at the hole in his chest, just below his right shoulder, from which blood had spilled all over his clothes. In fact, it still bled sluggishly.

Jack's comrades heaved his body on to the wooden table in the center of the cellar, and he groaned and opened his eyes before squeezing them shut again in obvious pain.

"See, Miss? He's not dead," one of smugglers assured her.

"Yes, but you can't leave him here or he soon will be!" Gillie exclaimed. She wasn't at all prepared for this.

She and her brother were in the middle of hosting one of their regular card parties. She'd only come down to the cellar because she didn't want the servants to discover the "gentlemen" making their normally silent delivery. It had certainly never entered her head that she might be presented with a bleeding smuggler along with her contraband brandy. Even more distressing, she'd known Jack since childhood.

"You must take him to a surgeon," she instructed. "Or better still, take him home and tell his wife to send for Doctor Morton. In my name, if she wishes."

"Can't take him through the streets in that state, can we?" the smuggler said reasonably. "The Watch will nab him sure as day and we'll all be done for."

Although he had a point, Gillie was about to insist, on the somewhat panicked grounds that her house was full of guests—until she remembered that one of those guests was, in fact, Doctor Morton. She closed her mouth.

"I'll do my best for him," she promised.

As she ran back upstairs into the main part of the house, she concentrated hard on how to save Smuggler Jack's life while hiding his presence from her guests, to say nothing of the Watch.

And of course, this was the best attended party they'd yet held, which would have been wonderful in other circumstances. More guests were arriving in the front hall. Surreptitiously, she shook the cellar dust from her dark grey gown, whose dull color at least hid most of the dirt. *Thank God we are still in mourning!*

Greeting the newcomers in her usual friendly fashion, she slipped between them and made her inexorable way to the large salon where

she was sure to find Doctor Morton.

In the doorway lounged a tall man in impeccable black evening clothes. One ankle crossed over the other, his arms folded across his chest, he leaned against the doorframe. His posture betrayed insufferable boredom. Guilt smote her—for this venture of hers and her brother Bernard's, could not work with bored guests—until she flicked her gaze up to his saturnine face. Short, black hair framed a stunningly handsome countenance. Or at least it would have been handsome were it not for the upward slope of his somewhat satanic eyebrows and the discontented curve of his full, decadent lips. Disconcertingly, his hard, grey eyes were fixed on hers.

A flush rose to her cheeks, adding to her flustered state. She had to force herself to a vague, distant smile and a slightly breathless, "Excuse me," as she hurried past. Although he unfolded his arms, he certainly didn't jump to give her room.

London manners, she assumed scathingly. If she hadn't been in such a hurry, she'd have been disappointed. Such a good looking man should have been better natured.

Hastily, she returned the good evenings of the elderly Misses Dundas at the whist table, and waved in friendly manner to the many greetings called out to her by the officers playing piquet and hazard.

"Doctor Morton," she exclaimed in relief, as she finally reached her grey-whiskered quarry in his regimental red and gold coat. He stood, drinking tea with another officer and a visiting gentleman with gout.

He beamed upon her. "Ah, there you are, Gillie! How are you?"

"Perfectly well, Doctor," she said thoughtlessly, before realizing she could have used ill-health as a reason to extract him from the company. *Oh well.* "But I wondered if we might have a word on another matter?"

Giving him little choice, she relieved him of his cup and saucer, setting them down on the side table. Then she simply took his arm and tugged.

Doctor Morton, who'd known her since childhood—had indeed delivered both Gillie and Bernard to their proud parents—patted her hand in a soothing kind of a way.

"What's up, little lamb?" he asked jovially.

She barely noticed the nick-name, which had been given to her when she was about eight years old and imitating the jumping of spring lambs for the entertainment of her parents' friends.

She lowered her voice so that he had to duck his head to hear her. "We have an injured man in the cellar and I'm afraid he'll die if you don't help him. Or even if you do," she added honestly.

"Not sure the cellar's the best place for an injured man," the doctor observed.

"I'll move him when I can," Gillie promised. "But if you would be so very good as to look at him now in the cellar—" She broke off, for by then they'd reached the salon door, where the dark, satanic stranger still lurked, still watching her. At least he'd uncrossed his ankles by then, and he did move aside with the faintest, ironic bow as they brushed through the door.

Annoyingly, the entrance hall was now clear, leaving the stranger a direct view of her passage with the doctor across the hall to the basement stairs. God knew what he imagined, although she comforted herself with the undoubted fact that it was none of his business.

The rest of the smugglers had cravenly vanished, presumably back along the tunnel to the Black Cove and their ship, leaving poor Jack behind on the wooden table surrounded by bottles and kegs. There was a lot of blood, clearly visible, even in the dim light, although Jack had blessedly lost consciousness again.

"You're still buying from smugglers?" Doctor Morton said, scowling, as he took in the situation and lifted a lit lantern from the floor. "You do know they're in league with Bonaparte himself now, don't you?"

"Oh, I don't believe ours are," Gillie said staunchly. "Not directly, at any rate. They bring the stuff north from colleagues on the south coast. Who may well," she admitted honestly, "be in league with Bonaparte. But where else would I get brandy of this quality?"

Doctor Morton grunted. "Go away, Gillie. Send me some water and bandages and preferably a maid you trust—or even Bernard—to assist me."

"I can assist you," she offered.

"Your absence will be noted," Morton said, already cutting away the man's coat with a knife from his belt. "It already has been, you know. I'll speak to you later."

She hesitated only a moment longer. "Thank you, Doctor," she said awkwardly, then, pausing only to pat the unconscious Jack's good shoulder, she hurried back upstairs.

Forcing herself not to glance in the direction of the salon in case the satanic gentleman was still there, she crossed the hall and ran up the main staircase, calling for Dulcie who had been nursemaid and surrogate mother to both herself and her brother.

"Dulcie, you must take bandages to Doctor Morton in the cellar, and collect a bowl of fresh water from the kitchen for him, too."

Dulcie, somewhat erratically mending stockings by the old nursery lamplight, stared at her. "What's the doctor doing in the cellar?"

"Hopefully sewing up a shot smuggler," Gillie said frankly. "I can't help since we have a house full of guests who mustn't know anything about it."

“Where is your aunt?” Dulcie demanded, hurling stocking and needle from her. “I don’t know what she’s thinking of, allowing these ridiculous parties—which will be the end of you, Gillie Muir, mark my words! It just *isn’t* a respectable way to go on. And now she’s allowing smugglers in the cellar!”

“Dulcie, *please* will you look after Jack?” Gillie begged. “We’ll put him somewhere more comfortable later, but truly, we can’t let him die. He took Bernie and me fishing when we were children. You came once, too.”

Dulcie sniffed and stood up. Reaching to the top drawer of the dresser, she extracted long strips of bandage, stuffing them into her work bag on top of whatever else was in there. She added scissors and several jars and bottles familiar to Gillie from childhood scrapes and bruises. What use they might be to a man with far more serious injury, Gillie didn’t care to guess. But at least they proved Dulcie’s cooperation.

Gillie blew her a kiss. “Thank you, Dulcie!” Pausing only to check her hair and gown in the glass, she hurried back downstairs.

To her relief, the strange gentleman no longer propped up the salon doorway. It hadn’t been comfortable to have her comings and goings observed quite so closely, although she couldn’t help a flicker of interest in return. She wondered who he was and why he had come to a place which so clearly bored him.

However, her respite was short-lived, for as Dulcie began to hobble downstairs behind her, a movement caught Gillie’s eye at the basement stairs.

Her stomach lurched with quick alarm, for she knew Doctor Morton could not have finished with his patient so soon. Since no one else was around to see, she leapt the last three steps at once and bolted across the hall to the cellar stairs. An elegant, dark-haired gentleman in black had almost reached the shadows at the bottom. Worse, she was sure she recognized him.

“Sir!”

He paused, glancing over his shoulder. It was indeed the satanic gentleman.

“Madam,” he returned, with the faintest bow. His voice was cool, deep, and far from unpleasant. Nor did he seem remotely embarrassed to be discovered at the foot of a stranger’s cellar stairs.

“If there is something you require, allow me to fetch it for you,” she said as civilly as she could.

“A key to this door would be appreciated.”

In fact, she hadn’t even locked it, but something about his face told her his outrageous request wasn’t entirely serious.

“Unfortunately, I cannot help you there,” she said regally. “But I

assure you we don't require our guests to fetch their own wine from our cellar. The servants will bring it to you."

"I'm disappointed. It seemed such a busy place that I was sure there was some much more interesting entertainment going on down here."

"Hardly," Gillie said hastily, ignoring the not-so-veiled insult. "Unless you find broken bottles diverting."

Part of her itched to descend the rest of the way, seize him by the arm, and drag him back up the stairs before he could reach out and open the cellar door. But somehow, he didn't seem the kind of man one would touch let alone drag around without permission. Which was ridiculous when he was undoubtedly in the wrong. She hoped she wouldn't need to summon Danny from his watch position outside... She struggled to find polite words to order the stranger back up.

Unexpectedly, he smiled. "Don't spare my feelings. I'm well aware I have no business exploring your house without permission."

She swallowed, for even in the poor light, that smile was devastating. A little desperately, she lifted her chin. "Then please be so good as to return with me to the salons."

Before she'd even finished speaking, he moved with unexpected speed and no less elegance, climbing the steps three at a time. By her last word, he stood on the same step as she, gazing down at her with remains of that overwhelming smile still lurking on his sensual lips.

"With pleasure," he murmured.

There was something altogether too large and disturbing about his person so close to her. He smelled very clean and fresh...apart from the hint of wine on his breath that reminded her to turn hastily and take the last two steps back up to the hallway.

Although he followed her obediently, she was sure his gaze mocked her. She could feel it burning into the back of her neck as they walked in silence to the salon.

From the whist table between the Misses Dundas, her aunt Margaret cocked an interrogative eyebrow. Gillie nodded reassuringly and turned straight into an officer who seized both of her hands and spun her around in a circle before kissing her cheek.

"Gillie Muir! It is you!"

"Kit!" she exclaimed with delight, recognizing an old friend who had been in Spain for the last several months. "How wonderful! I didn't know you were back."

Kit released her hands to point at his leg with a grimace. "Wretched thing's misbehaving, so they sent me home on leave. Which is dashed annoying when I could be helping kick Bonaparte out of Spain!"

"They sent him to Doctor Morton," one of his companions, Major

Randolph, explained, “whom he’s avoiding like the plague. Which is no way to get back to Spain in a hurry.”

Kit—more properly, Captain Grantham, whom she’d known since he was a very green and youthful coronet—aimed an easily dodged kick at Randolph’s shins. “You just want to take my place,”

“I do, dear boy, and more,” Randolph said lazily, “but there, someone has to shuffle the regimental papers.”

Major Randolph, once tipped to be the new commander of the 44th when Colonel Fredericks retired, had been passed over for a new man from a different regiment altogether. Randolph had never shown the slightest sign of disappointment or complained about being part of the staff left behind when half the regiment joined Lord Wellington on the Peninsula. Gillie liked him for that, although not for drawing attention to Doctor Morton’s absence.

“Where is the old quack?” Randolph inquired, looking around him.

“He’s here tonight, somewhere,” Gillie said hastily, reminded to glance around for her satanic stranger while she pretended to search for the doctor. She caught a glimpse of his back wandering into the smaller salon, but before she could analyze whether her deep breath was one of relief or disappointment, her restless gaze found yet another old friend.

Her eyes widened. “Good grief!”

The Earl of Braithwaite stood up from the hazard table and grinned as she approached. “My lord!” she exclaimed.

“Miss Muir,” he returned mockingly, as he took her outstretched hand. “You’ll be telling me next what an honor it is to receive me.”

“Well, I suppose it is that, too,” she admitted. “But mostly it’s a surprise. How long have you been home?”

“Just a day or so.” His smile faded and he squeezed her hand before releasing it. “I was so sorry to hear about Captain Muir.”

Over the few months since her father’s death, she’d learned to deal with the frequent lump in her throat. “Thank you.”

“You’ll tell me if there’s anything I can do?”

“Of course, but truly we are managing. Thank you.”

Relief tinged his face as he changed the subject. “I hope you’re coming to this wretched ball tomorrow evening.”

“Wretched?” she repeated in mock outrage. “*Wretched?* My dear, sir, the entire county has been looking forward to it for weeks.”

“How so when my mother has been so eclipsed as Blackhaven’s most notable hostess? All we hear about now are Miss Muir’s card parties.”

“Quiet and select gatherings, my lord,” she said primly, although she allowed her eyes to dance. “Nothing on Lady Braithwaite’s scale!”

She passed on between the tables and into the smaller salon where

the deeper gaming tended to take place, and where they served smuggled brandy and fine wine instead of tea. She assured herself she was checking to see there were enough refreshments available, that observing the stranger was merely a secondary chore. When she had a moment, she should ask Bernard who he was. He didn't look like the sort of man who came to Blackhaven for the beneficial water. He looked to be, in fact, one of the healthiest and strongest people she had ever encountered. Although he could well be accompanying a sickly parent or friend...or wife.

In the smaller room, she was greeted by her brother Bernard and several jovial young men at the faro table.

"A little more brandy here, since you're passing, Gillie," Bernard requested.

As she walked toward the sideboard where the decanters sat, she became aware of the tall, dark figure who stood in front of them, pouring brandy into a glass. For no reason she could account for, her heart seemed to flutter.

He actually turned and bowed to her with perfect civility, although if she were being critical, it was more of an inclination of the head. "May I pour you a glass of brandy?"

The deep, modulated voice sent shivers down her spine. The man had a most peculiar effect upon her.

"Thank you," she managed lightly. "But I was just going to leave them an entire decanter and let them pour as they will."

One sloping eyebrow lifted. "Leave whom with an entire decanter?"

She waved one hand toward Bernard's table of players. "My brother and his friends."

"I have no intention of serving *them*," her stranger said with distaste. "My offer was to you."

She smiled involuntarily. "I don't drink brandy, sir!"

His eyes dropped to her lips. "You should when it's as good as this." A glass was thrust toward her and she was just bemused enough to take it. "Miss Muir, I apprehend."

"Yes, but you have the advantage. I don't believe I know you, and I usually remember everyone."

"We've never met," he acknowledged. "I'm afraid I came with Braithwaite."

"Oh," she said, relieved that he wasn't simply some stranger who'd turned up uninvited and would have to be asked to leave, by Danny if necessary. "Then you are most welcome!"

"I thought I might be," he murmured. "Tell me, was that young Kit Grantham I saw you with in the other room?"

"Yes indeed. That is, I did speak to him. Do you know Kit?"

"Not in the slightest. I'm acquainted with his mother."

"Let me introduce you," she said at once, forgetting she didn't actually know the stranger's name as yet in her determination to be an excellent hostess.

"On no account," the stranger said at once, "would I willingly exchange your company for his."

She cast him a quick glance, uncertain if he were mocking her.

He sipped his brandy. "I was merely trying to establish if he were the kind of hotheaded young officer to call me out for monopolizing your company."

She laughed. "Kit? He's far too good-natured to quarrel over trivia."

The devil's eyebrow rose again. "You regard yourself as trivial, Miss Muir? I must disagree."

"Well it's very kind of you to say so," she said, amused. "I suppose I just mean that we've known each other forever and he has no interest in who speaks to me." She considered. "Unless you were a villain of some kind," she added in the interest of honesty. "Which I doubt you are!"

"Opinions vary," the stranger said sardonically. "Shall we sit here?" He moved, ushering her toward the little alcove where two armchairs were set in the window.

Since it was her part of this enterprise to make guests comfortable, she made no demur. She only hoped he couldn't hear the strangely quickened beat of her heart. Something about him intrigued her.

"Hoi, Gillie! The brandy!" Bernard called after her.

The stranger paused, his hand on the alcove curtain, and glanced over his shoulder. "Shift for yourself," he advised, and let the curtain fall.

Gillie couldn't prevent the gurgle of laughter escaping her throat. "Oh dear, I am a poor hostess!"

"Not in the slightest, you are entertaining me."

"Am I?" she said lightly, concerned that the curtain was drawn, isolating their alcove, although she imagined it was an accident on his part. Unobtrusively, she tweaked the curtain back. "Then at the very least, you should tell me your name."

"Keith. David Keith." He clinked glasses with her, a rather charmingly casual gesture, and held one of the chairs for her to sit. "What sort of a name is Gillie?"

She wrinkled her nose as she sat down. "Short for Gillyflower. I've insisted on Gillie since I could talk."

"Why? I rather like Gillyflower. It suits you."

She laughed. "No, it doesn't! There is nothing flower-like about me!"

A faint smile of response lingered on his lips, but as though he'd forgotten about it. He gazed at her without blinking.

Disconcerted, she blurted, "I saw you earlier, in the doorway. You looked...bored."

"I was until I saw you."

She flushed, covering her unaccustomed gaucheness by nervously rearranging her skirts. "Then you don't care for cards?"

He took a sip of his brandy. "Sometimes. When the stakes are high enough to excite me."

"Ah. We are too provincial for your taste," she said deprecatingly.

"I didn't say that. It would give me no pleasure to fleece your squire of his sheep."

"He might fleece you of yours."

He appeared to consider that. "I don't know that I have any, though I suppose I must. At any rate, it would take either of us weeks to win anything worth having at those stakes, which is damned dull when there's a girl as beautiful as you in the house."

She blinked. "I'm not beautiful."

He raised one eyebrow. "I don't lie. Or repeat myself. Drink your brandy."

She glanced at the glass, almost surprised to see it still in her hand. "I don't believe I like brandy. I took a sip of my father's once and it was nasty."

"This isn't, I assure you. But if you're not responsible for it, who is?"

"My brother Bernard. My father always said his palette was his only sign of intelligence."

Mr. Keith looked faintly amused. "Is it?"

"No," Gillie allowed. "He's pretty good at cards, too."

"Are you warning me he's a sharp?"

"Lord, no, he never cheats," Gillie said, genuinely shocked. "Besides, I thought you wouldn't play for such paltry, provincial stakes?"

"I might for the pleasure of exposing a sharp."

"You have very odd pleasures," she said tartly.

His lips curved. He lowered his hip onto the arm of her chair, which brought him a little too close for comfort. "You don't yet know anything about my pleasures,"

Defiantly, she counted them off on her fingers. "Brandy, card sharps, lack of sheep..."

Quite suddenly, his smile was genuine. "Are you making fun of me, Miss Muir?"

"Only in a friendly way."

"Then you may add that to your list of my pleasures." He set his

glass on the table, straightened, and strolled out of the alcove.

Gillie blinked after him in mingled surprise and disappointment. Really, his manners were quite eccentric. She wondered if her humor had offended him, though it hadn't appeared to. Or perhaps he was just over-haughty—which begged the question why he'd spoken to her in the first place. Boredom, no doubt, clearly unrelieved by her conversation.

She had just risen from her chair again when he walked back into the alcove, a pack of cards in his left hand. His right reached for the curtain, then catching her eye, he released a silent breath of laughter and left the curtain alone.

"Shall we play for love or money?" he asked, taking the other chair, and shuffling the cards.

"I think it would bore you to play snap for either."

"On the contrary," he said at once.

Again, she caught a faint whiff of wine and brandy on his breath, but neither his speech nor his movements were those of a man in his cups. "Er...what is snap?"

"The only card game I play. Bernard and I invented it as children and made our parents play. We divided the cards between us and then took it in turns to play the cards one at a time in a pile. When you play a card of the same number as the one before, you have to snap your hand over it to claim the whole pile. The winner, of course, is the person who gains all the cards. You see? No sophistication and no stakes whatever."

"Nevertheless," he said, beginning to deal the cards between them with quick, smooth actions, "if that is your choice, I am happy to play."

Gillie's eyes strayed to his face. She guessed he was veiling his expression. It made her heart beat faster to imagine he was hiding too sudden an interest in her. She could even laugh at herself for such a fantasy. And yet, what other reason could he have for singling her out like this? Playing a child's game with her...

It all added a rather breathless intoxication to the game, which was quick and evenly matched. As they played, he distracted her with witticisms and questions until she did the same to him, when he threatened to take back his cards and play no longer.

"Except that the cards are mine," she pointed out.

He shoved them toward her. "Take them, with the last of my self-esteem."

She laughed. "Truly, I am not so petulant."

"On the other hand, the game grows noisier with time and we shall draw unwelcome attention."

She glanced up and saw that a few amused faces were already

turned toward them, including that of Lord Braithwaite, who seemed highly entertained by the sight of his haughty and presumably fashionable London friend playing such a ridiculous game for no money whatsoever.

"I think we already have," she said ruefully, rising to her feet. "I have been distracted from my duties long enough, sir."

He stood, too. "Five more minutes to make you laugh again." Reaching up, he drew back the window curtain next to him, to reveal the French glass door onto the little terrace and the garden beyond. The night was clear and the moon full, spilling its light across the lawn and the blossoming trees to the little summer house. "You have a pretty garden. Shall we?"

Gillie hesitated. Although she knew the rules of propriety, she'd always been among friends here in Blackhaven. And if this man was a stranger, she still knew him to be a friend of Lord Braithwaite, with whom she'd been acquainted since childhood, along with his family. Besides, it was hard to doubt a man who'd played snap with her.

But even as she stood and unlocked the garden door, she understood there was more to it than that. He intrigued her. He was different, apparently oblivious to accepted manners and etiquette, yet possessed of elegance and self-assurance beyond any she'd encountered before. And if she was honest, his interest flattered her. To most of the young men of her acquaintance, she was simply Gillie, whom they'd known forever. No one told her she was beautiful as if they actually meant it, or deliberately chose her company over that of the cards or the dice. No one had ever invited her to walk in the moonlit garden.

"You left your glass," he observed as they paused on the terrace.

"Were you planning on making a toast?" she teased.

He raised his glass. "To the moon," he said, but instead of drinking, he offered her the glass.

Recklessly, she took it. "The moon," she agreed and sipped warily. The fumes caught her breath and the liquid burned its way through her mouth and down her throat. The sensation was far from unpleasant.

"I like it better now," she said in surprise, handing the glass back. He took it quickly, trapping her hand beneath his and bending his head to drink from the exact place on the glass her lips had just touched.

Her whole body heated in the friendly darkness. "Are you flirting with me?" she asked breathlessly.

He smiled. "Most definitely. Do you mind?"

She licked her dry upper lip, and his gaze dropped, following the movement in an avid way that made her cheeks burn. "I don't know,"

she said honestly.

“Then let’s see.” He bent his head, still clasping her hand over the brandy glass and kissed her mouth.

She should, of course, have slapped his face, or at least pulled away from him at once. But in truth, his action took her so much by surprise that in the first instance, she was simply stunned that he would dare. In the second instance, she realized his lips were warm and firm and strangely exciting and that there seemed to be butterflies soaring and diving in her stomach. And by the time his free hand came up to hold her nape while he deepened the kiss, she was more afraid of it ending than of anything else.

Her mouth yielded helplessly, letting him explore and plunder. Her free hand clutched at his coat for support and, without really knowing how, she was returning his kiss.

“Please add that,” he whispered against her lips, “to your list of my pleasures.”

And mine. Fortunately, she couldn’t yet speak, just gaze mutely into his hot, clouded eyes—how had she ever thought them cool? His fingers caressed the back of her neck. She could no longer doubt that he liked her, and nothing in the world had ever been as sweet and arousing at that knowledge.

“I’d like to discover a few of yours,” he murmured. “Take me to your chamber.”

Chapter Two

GILLIE BLINKED AT him, uncertain that she'd heard him properly. "I beg your pardon?"

"Your bedchamber. I want you very badly."

By then, they stood so close together that she finally understood the hardness pressing against her stomach. With a gasp of outrage, she tore herself free.

"How dare you? Do you take me for a—a..." She struggled to find the word. "...a *camp follower*?"

"Not exactly." He sounded more amused than contrite. "I understood you were free, but if you're not interested, just say so."

For some reason, her eyes stung. It wasn't so much the insult to her honor. It was...*hurt*, because she'd actually liked him. She'd actually believed he liked her. She'd naively, stupidly, mistaken his sordid interest for romance. The earlier conversation about Kit suddenly made lowering new sense.

"Danny!" she called, drawing herself up to her full height.

"Who the devil is Danny?" he asked, sounding a little less amused and a little more irritated.

"I am," said her father's old sergeant, emerging around the side of the house at high speed. He'd been keeping his eye out for the Watch, who'd visited more than once before to be sure the parties were truly private affairs.

"This gentleman is leaving, Danny," she said, proud that her voice didn't shake like her knees. "He is not allowed back."

Without waiting to see her order carried out, she turned on her heel and walked back across the terrace. She held her head high, but it made no difference. She'd never felt so stupid, so humiliated, so insulted. And God help her, so disappointed.

She re-entered the house by the kitchen door in order to avoid her guests until she had calmed her temper and the angry tears. The cook and maids barely noticed her as they put the finishing touches to the supper dishes about to be served. She flitted past them, using the back stairs to reach her bedchamber where she washed her flushed face and repinned her slightly wild hair before descending once more to do her duty.

"There you are," Bernard said in relief, crossing the empty hall to meet her. "Not one to preach proprieties as you know, but, seriously,

not sure you should wander off alone with the wicked baron. He ain't at all the thing. Or at least not in that way."

"Bernie, what are you talking about?" she asked impatiently.

"Wickenden! You sat down with him in the alcove, then went out into the garden."

"His name is Keith,"

"Yes," Bernard said impatiently. "David Keith, tenth Baron Wickenden."

"Oh." The name and title meant nothing to her except mild irritation. "Well, it doesn't matter. You're quite right, he isn't the thing, so I had Danny throw him out and told him he isn't allowed back."

Bernard blanched. "You did *what*?"

"I had Danny throw him out—"

"Damn it, Gillie, what the hell for? You've ruined us just as we were beginning to make something of this!"

"Don't be so melodramatic. The man insulted me. I don't care if he has a title—"

"It ain't his title that concerns me. Don't you know *anything* about London fashion? Wickenden leads the fast set and has such influence that one word from him and no one will bother coming to our parties – except a few old friends out of pity."

She shrugged. "Maybe, but why would he bother to speak such a word? We're nothing to him."

"Let's hope so, but trust me, Gillie, he's got a nasty reputation for vindictiveness. I wouldn't put it past him to ruin us on a whim of revenge before he forgets us altogether."

Gillie stared at him, unease growing steadily into something akin to horror. "But...but he was in the wrong, Bernie!"

"It makes no odds," Bernard said, dragging his fingers through his hair until it stood up in spikes. "The wicked baron never apologizes. He just leaves a trail of ruin in his wake, including us. We're done for." He paced as far as the mirror on the wall, where he hastily flattened his hair with his hands before swinging back toward her. "Unless we apologize to him. That might work."

Gillie closed her mouth. "Apologize for what?" she said flatly. "Refusing to let him in my bed?"

Bernard's mouth fell open. "Oh the *devil*!" he exclaimed, clearly wishing for a stronger expletive and tearing at his intricately folded cravat instead. "Now I shall have to call him out and you'll be left all alone when I'm dead."

Gillie saw at once that rage had caused her to reveal too much. Worse, now that she thought about it, even she had heard talk of the wicked baron. He'd fought duels before, was even rumored to have

killed his man once and only been saved from the law by a lot of judicious string pulling. Under no circumstances could she let Bernard near such a predator.

"No, no, it wasn't that bad," she said hastily. "I was exaggerating from sheer temper. I could just see that was where it would lead, so of course I was angry at such an insult. But there, he is a stranger in Blackhaven and clearly misunderstood many things...Leave it to me, Bernie. I shall apologize and make it right. You mustn't even let on that I've told you anything about this quarrel. Promise me."

*

LORD WICKENDEN, DEEP in thought, had no sooner followed Danny, the burly watchman – or whatever he was – around the side of the house before the fellow came at him in the darkness. From pure instinct, perhaps leavened with a little luck, Wickenden threw up his guard in time to ward off two hefty blows that would almost certainly have felled him if they'd reached their mark. Since the man's balance was all wrong, he stumbled and Wickenden was able to seize him in an arm lock.

"Damn it, you're quick for a toff," Danny panted. "Doesn't mean this is finished!"

"There, I agree with you."

"You've no cause to come here upsetting Miss Gillie!"

Wickenden considered. On the whole, he tended to agree, although he was well aware his judgement had been clouded by contraband French brandy and a pair of laughing hazel eyes.

"I've had a few," he admitted, "so I'll make a deal with you. Once I've had a chance to think about this, if I decide I was in the wrong, I'll come back and let you hit me for free."

Danny stopped struggling.

"In the meantime, I'll go on my way and you go on yours," Wickenden suggested.

Danny was really in no position to refuse. "All right," he said grudgingly. "But you're a bloody odd gentleman."

"You're a bloody odd servant."

"I do what's required," Danny said with dignity, rolling his shoulders and straightening his lapels as Wickenden released him.

"Did she give you some signal to beat me?" Wickenden asked curiously.

Danny laughed with utter scorn. "*Miss Gillie?* God, no, it would never enter her head, let alone her soft heart. *I* decided that was required!"

"Hmm," Wickenden said thoughtfully and strolled down the path

and out of the front gate.

Blackhaven was not a large town, and Wickenden did not find himself spoiled for choices of entertainment. Braithwaite had heard tell of some new, extraordinary bordello, whose existence so close to his ancestral home seemed to amuse him. They'd been on their way there when, on impulse, Wickenden had suggested stopping first at "the Muirs". Although Braithwaite had looked slightly surprised that Wickenden had heard of the place, he'd made no demur. And indeed, it had proved to be some kind of genteel if illegal gambling den.

Miss Muir herself, however, was not at all what he'd expected. In fact, he rather wished he hadn't got involved. He should have followed his original inclinations and stayed away from Lillian's affairs. In fact, he should have stayed in London. Although it was true he'd found life there confoundingly boring, too. And uncomfortable.

A brisk five minutes' walk took him to a tavern where he sat down and ordered more brandy.

Around half an hour later, Braithwaite walked in. The locals all tugged their forelocks, although not terribly obsequiously, and the earl exchanged a few words with a couple of them in passing before throwing himself down at the rickety table opposite Wickenden and placing two tall beaver hats between them.

"What do you need two for?" Wickenden asked.

"One of them's yours, idiot. You left it at the Muirs'."

"So I did." He called peremptorily for another glass before sweeping the hat onto the seat beside him and fixing his friend with a frown. "It's not a gaming hell, is it?"

Braithwaite blinked. "Good God, no. Who told you it was? They just do card parties rather well."

"No, there's more to it than that," Wickenden insisted. "But she—Miss Muir—is no game girl. Nor even a scheming courtesan."

Braithwaite's jaw dropped. "Game girl? Courtesan? No! She's the respectable daughter of an army officer. He died on the Peninsula a few months back. She lives in her family home with her brother and a scatterbrained but quite unexceptionable spinster aunt. Plus, she's something of a friend of mine. She shared the schoolroom with my sisters for a few years."

"Damn," Wickenden said without heat. "I shall have to get a black eye."

"What?"

Wickenden sighed. "Nothing. I'm afraid I insulted your friend." And be damned to Lillian Grantham who'd involved him in this. He was fairly sure it had been Lillian's son who'd greeted Gillie as soon as they'd re-entered the gaming salon. In which case, it was clearly their first meeting in months and any affection of longstanding. Hardly the

whirlwind seduction of a wicked temptress digging her claws into a man for his money. On the contrary, Wickenden had detected nothing terribly lover-like in their greetings at all. Especially not in hers, although sticklers might fault her friendliness and somewhat free manners. Wickenden rather liked them.

Braithwaite eyed him uneasily while he sloshed brandy into the glass which had been plonked onto the table in front of the earl. "You didn't...hurt her, did you?" he said uneasily.

Wickenden raised his annoyed left eyebrow which had been known to shatter lesser men. "What do you take me for?" *A killer, a man of pointless violence*, he thought savagely. It seemed to be what he'd become. Irritably, he seized his glass and threw off the self-loathing, which served no purpose to anyone. "Though I do owe her an apology," he admitted.

"Well, she'll be at my mother's wretched ball tomorrow night, so do so then. She won't really black your eye, you know. She's a very forgiving soul is Gillie. Has to be, really. She's quite used to young officers misbehaving in their cups."

Wickenden stared at him, then uttered a short laugh and threw back the rest of his brandy. "That does not," he said standing up, "make me feel better. Come on, show me the rest of this benighted town of yours."

*

BEFORE MIDDAY THE following morning, Lord Wickenden knocked on the door of the Muirs' house. He'd already dashed off a hasty missive to Lillian, informing her that the girl concerned was not of the class or style she'd imagined and, that so far as he could tell, she'd no more intention of marrying Kit than her own brother. For the sake of the softer feelings he'd once harbored for Lillian, he added that he would keep an eye on things for as long as he stayed in Cumbria. Leaving the letter with others to be posted from the castle, he cleared his slightly heavy head with a brisk walk into Blackhaven.

Although small by the standards of his own Grosvenor Square mansion in London, the Muirs' house was a decent, detached property, well-spaced from its neighbors along the crescent. Blackhaven was growing, burgeoning with new, large houses on the outskirts, thanks, he'd been told, to the discovery of a local spring's almost miraculous health benefits. But this house was long established, at least fifty or so years old. He suspected it had been here longer than the 44th Regiment's barracks.

The front door swung open and a burly man of some sixty winters stood there, scowling at him. Wickenden knew him at once by his

shape, if not by his gnarled old face, which had been veiled in darkness before. From his blank expression, Danny didn't recognize him.

Wickenden sighed in a resigned kind of way, took off his hat, and pointed to his jaw.

Danny's eyes widened at once. "You!" He drew back his arm, his large hand fisted at the business end. Then he paused and slowly lowered it. "Not the same when you let me. Doesn't feel right. You're still barred, though."

"Who is it, Danny?" came a slightly breathless voice that Wickenden recognized at once. In spite of himself, his heart lifted.

"Gent we ejected last night," Danny replied, without removing his gaze from Wickenden. "I've told him he's still—"

"No!" There came a distant thud and a patter of rushing footsteps before, much to Wickenden's amusement, the closing door was wrenched from Danny's grip and the girl from last night stared at him in something very like alarm.

She was still mouthwateringly lovely in the daylight. He'd gazed at her a lot last night, at first trying to work out exactly what kind of a woman she was, and then what it was about her appearance that moved him. For her dress had been both drab and unfashionable, her hair should have been better cut, and there was no modish languor in her posture. Provincial beauties and ingenues didn't normally interest him, and yet something about this girl's natural vivacity and friendliness had made her shine. It didn't hurt that she had fine, fair skin and sparkingly bright hazel eyes that were almost green. Or that her auburn hair shone with more health than artifice. He wouldn't have been remotely surprised if Kit Grantham had succumbed to her undoubted charms.

This morning, her hair was escaping its pins and she wore a drab day gown, but she was no less beautiful, the hectic flush in her pale cheeks just as adorable as when he'd made her blush last night.

But that was a route best avoided for both their sakes.

He bowed and curtly presented his card. "I won't stay or even speak. Good morning."

"No, no, wait!" she uttered in what sounded like panicked accents. She snatched the card without looking at it. "Please, wait. Won't you come in?"

Behind her, Danny scowled and further behind *him*, someone groaned in pain. Danny immediately looked furtive.

"Danny, get Bernard to help you take Jack to his room," Miss Muir said hastily, and to Wickenden. "One of our servants has been taken ill. Please, come up to the parlor."

Since she turned and tripped across the hall to the staircase,

Wickenden shrugged in Danny's direction and followed her. He couldn't help one curious glance at the sick servant who lay on a makeshift stretcher covered in blankets from neck to toe. He seemed to have been abandoned at the top of the basement steps.

The basement again. A lot seemed to go on in that cellar and he certainly hadn't forgotten Miss Muir's almost panicked efforts to keep him out of it.

Wickenden stopped. If the brother had been up and abroad, or if, perhaps, they'd trusted any other of the servants, Miss Muir would not have been carrying stretchers. "Where do you want him?" he asked.

Miss Muir paused at the foot of the main staircase, one hand on the bannister. "I beg your pardon?"

"Your—er—sick servant."

"Um...oh no, I don't think—"

"First attic room," Danny said, bending to one end of the stretcher. Clearly, he hadn't approved of his mistress carrying the stretcher in the first place. "Lead the way, Miss."

Although she made no further objection but merely led the way up two flights of stairs to the servant's quarters, it seemed to Wickenden that she was distressed. It was in the tense rigidity of her shoulders and the stiffness of her movements as she climbed.

The patient himself looked terribly pale as Wickenden helped lift him from the stretcher onto the newly made bed indicated. The bedchamber, small and bare, was devoid of any possessions, even a comb. This was not, clearly, the sick man's usual resting place. He was no more a servant here than Wickenden.

"What's wrong with him?" Wickenden asked.

"You don't want to know," Danny said shortly. "Thanks for your help. Don't think any more about him."

"Guaranteed to whet one's curiosity," Wickenden murmured as he followed Miss Muir back downstairs. "Is he the reason you spent so much of yesterday evening in the basement?"

She laughed without looking at him, the first unnatural sound he'd heard her make. "That was about the brandy," she said lightly. "And breakages."

It may have been. Partly. Had they been on the south coast rather on the north west, Wickenden would have suspected dealings with smugglers. In fact, with a little less certainty, he still did.

On the first floor landing, Gillie opened a door into a bright, sunny parlor, where a middle-aged lady in spectacles sat knitting.

"My aunt, Miss Muir," the girl murmured, then raising her voice, "Aunt Margaret, Lord Wickenden is here."

"How lovely," beamed the aunt. "Ring for tea, Gillie."

Wickenden chose the sofa as the sturdiest looking piece of

furniture, leaving the elegant armchair for the younger Miss Muir. She, however, surprised him by pulling the bell and then promptly seating herself on the sofa beside him.

"My aunt is a little deaf," Miss Muir said, a shade nervously. "She won't hear us...I have to apologize," she said in a rush.

He raised both his brows. "For your aunt being deaf?"

"For last night," she blurted.

He couldn't prevent the faint frown twitching at his brow. He eased further back into the sofa, resting his arm along its back as he tuned to face her. He could easily lift his fingers and touch her shoulder, her elegant neck where delicate blue veins just showed beneath the pallor of her skin. "Last night?" he prompted.

She drew in her breath. "I am not used to the ways of fashionable society," she said in a rush. "I should not have been so angry that you were misled by my manners." She was no longer looking at him but at her hands clasped tightly together in her lap. "I was unforgivably rude to you and, I suspect, so was Danny. I apologize for both of us, and of course you are welcome to join us on Friday and any other evening during your stay at Braithwaite Castle."

Well, she'd certainly taken him by surprise again. But this latest disappointed as well as appalled him. After a few moments of silence while he searched her averted face, she lifted her nervous gaze to his face.

"Lord Wickenden, I—"

"Of course." Understanding struck him like a blow to the head – as it should have earlier, for this was the second time this morning that she'd used his title. And yet, he'd never told her it, and she hadn't so much as glanced at his card. She'd asked his name last night and on impulse, that's what he'd given her. Mostly, he'd been sure she knew exactly who he was, hence her friendliness. But she hadn't known.

She did now. Inevitably, someone had told her, along with his infamy, deserved and otherwise.

"Interesting," he interrupted her without apology. "I entered your home without invitation, insulted you in every conceivable way so that you were forced to have your loyal henchman throw me out, and yet *you* apologize to *me*? What on earth possesses you to do such a thing?"

He caught the faintest glimmer of still-present outrage before the fear shut it out. Well, he was probably glaring. He'd been told his unblinking gaze could cut out a person's heart and shrivel it.

She tried to smile, though it wasn't a good effort. He was used to social, insincere smiles, and yet for some reason, hers infuriated him.

"Manners," she said with false brightness, "and the desire to do the right thing."

The almost painful rage intensified, because she hadn't been afraid of him last night. Beneath his own stupid misunderstanding, born of Lilian's ill-informed gossip and too much excellent brandy, there had been a genuine connection between him and this girl, a genuine and rather sweet attraction that he had spoiled.

And now *she* had. Irrevocably.

He stood, brushing an imaginary spec from the cuff of his elegant coat. "Am I to understand you regret rejecting me last night? Believe me, I am sensible of the honor. However, that time is now past and it is I who respectfully decline. Good day, Miss Muir."

He was savagely glad to see the appalled expressions flit across her face—at least they were honest—before he strolled from the room, remembering to bow most stylishly to the old lady on his way past.

It was fortunate, perhaps that there was no sign of Danny in the hall, for he would probably have knocked him down just to relieve his inexplicable fury.

*

"THAT MAN IS utterly detestable," Gillie muttered in a voice that shook as she paced up and down the parlor.

"*That* man? He seemed most civil to me," Aunt Margaret returned. "Though he didn't stay long, did he? Who did you say he was?"

"Lord Wickenden," Gillie replied with searing contempt.

Aunt Margaret heard that without difficulty, for her jaw dropped and her needles stilled. "What, *the* Lord Wickenden? The wicked baron?"

Gillie paused to blink at her. "Even *you* know of him?"

"I read the newspapers," Aunt Margaret returned with a dismissive wave of one hand. "But if he's coming here, Gillie, that is a great thing, for he will have made us fashionable already! In fact, to have called upon you... You do know he is not married and that he has a quite vulgarly large fortune?"

"I hope he loses it all in one game," Gillie said ferociously. "Right down to his last sheep which he affects to know nothing about!"

Mattie, the young housemaid, entered with the tea tray. Gillie had to bite her tongue to prevent herself ordering the girl to take it away again since she'd have nothing in this house even remotely associated with such an odious man who would never, ever, drink tea, brandy, or anything else in her home ever again.

Instead, she merely sniffed, thanked Mattie, and picked up the letter propped against the tea pot. It was addressed to her in a beautiful, looped hand that she didn't recognize. However, when she tore it open in the hope of distraction, she discovered that apart from

her name it made no sense.

Scowling, she endeavored to concentrate by calming her fury with Lord Wickenden and realized, eventually, that she couldn't understand the words because they were written in a foreign tongue.

"I can't read this," she said in frustration, thumbing through it until she came to the signature – a hugely long name she had no hope of pronouncing. "It's in Spanish, I think. Why would someone write to me in Spanish?"

"My brother, your father, died in Spain," Aunt Margaret reminded her with a hint of severity.

"Of course," Gillie agreed. "It's probably a letter of condolence from someone he knew there. How kind people are." She frowned again and let the letter fall. "*Some* people!"

She poured a cup of tea for her aunt and walked restlessly back to the sofa. Before she sat, something pale against the dark green velvet upholstery caught her eye. She bent and picked it up – a scrunched up piece of card, the card Lord Wickenden had thrust into her hand before she'd all but dragged him into the house to hear her apology.

She shuddered. She'd tried – and failed – to ingratiate herself and right now she was more ashamed of that than of letting him kiss her in the first place. Her fingers itched to hurl the crumpled card across the room, but since she didn't want to have to explain such odd behavior to her aunt, she sat and untwisted it, smoothing it out on her lap while Aunt Margaret talked about tonight's ball at the castle and who would be present.

His name and title were printed in the center of the card, as one might expect. Between that and a London address at the bottom left-hand corner, he'd scrawled something by hand. Surprised, she lifted the card, peering at it more closely and wishing she hadn't clutched it quite so hard as she'd watched him carry Smuggler Jack upstairs on his stretcher.

He'd written, *Please forgive the unforgivable.*

She frowned at it, uncomprehending. *I thought he never apologized...* She could almost imagine someone else had written on the card, not the odious man who'd insulted her yet again, in return for her own apology. Perhaps he was just insane.

Chapter Three

OF COURSE, THE town was all but bursting with excitement, not only over the earl's return for the castle ball, but over the dazzling array of fine guests he'd brought with him from London.

"I'm so pleased for Catherine," Mrs. Winslow, the squire's wife, confided when Gillie and her aunt encountered her outside the vicarage that afternoon. "It will make her first ball even more memorable. And I'm sure she will form friendships there among people of her own age, which will make her upcoming London season so much more comfortable."

"From what I hear," said Mrs. Gordon, the colonel's wife, with just a hint of waspishness, "she will also learn to recognize the pitfalls of London society. I gather Lady Crowmore is there. To say nothing of the Wicked Baron himself."

Gillie held on to her amiable expression and wondered how to change the subject. But Mrs. Winslow would not allow her rival to have a greater knowledge of the castle guests.

"Lord Wickenden does not concern me," she said grandly. "For one thing, even the most seasoned rake is bound to treat my Catherine with all the respect due to her birth. For another, Wickenden never dances."

"That is true," Mrs. Gordon allowed. "Besides, by all accounts, his tastes do not run to pre-debutantes or gauche young girls. I am sure your Catherine will be quite safe from his wiles."

Two patches of color flamed in Mrs. Winslow's cheeks. But before any kind of retort could rise to her lips, Aunt Margaret intervened. "I found him to be a most civil young man."

The other ladies turned to her, frowning. "Who is, Miss Muir?" Mrs. Winslow asked with a hint of condescension.

"Lord Wickenden. I do not believe he is as black as he is painted by gossip."

Mrs. Gordon laughed. "Gossip never said he was not charming! When did you meet him?"

"This morning," Aunt Margaret said. "He called on us. I believe he was at Bernard's party last night."

She couldn't have said anything more likely to draw her companions together in alliance.

"Then you must have the latest news," Mrs. Gordon said with a

curl of her lip. "Did he tell you—or Mr. Muir—about the duel that drove him up here? I hear his opponent is at death's door and he's only in Cumbria so that he might avoid the magistrates and take ship immediately should the man die."

Gillie's heart gave a little twist of distress. Gossip. Only gossip. But it brought an unpleasant taste to her mouth, an awareness that she knew nothing at all about the scandalous and perhaps downright nasty life of the man she'd let kiss her and provoke her to fury.

"Of course he never spoke of any such thing in front of us," Aunt Margaret said severely. "Even if it's true."

"And will you be at the ball, Gillie?" Mrs. Winslow asked in her condescending manner.

"Yes, we all plan to be there," Gillie replied as pleasantly as she could.

"How good dear Lady Braithwaite is..."

Gillie would have liked to ask her outright exactly why it was so much more "good" of Lady Braithwaite to invite the Muirs than anyone else, but Aunt Margaret hastily made their farewells with the excuse of more errands before tea, and drew her away.

"Honestly," Aunt Margaret hissed in her ear. "You would think she was some duke's daughter instead the curate's. She's grown much too puffed up in her own importance since she married George Winslow. Or perhaps she's just afraid you'll eclipse poor little Catherine."

Gillie scowled. "Fortunately, I have neither the ability nor the desire to eclipse anyone." Certainly not Catherine, whom she rather liked, and whose worst quality was her overbearing mother.

*

GILLIE MEANT TO sleep late the morning of the castle ball, in order to be fresh and rested for the social event of Blackhaven's year. However, as soon as she opened one eye at her usual waking hour, she remembered Wickenden's insults and all remnants of sleep fled in the face of her new surge of outrage.

Giving in, she rose, washed and dressed, and decided to walk off her ill-nature on the beach. She pulled on her old shoes and bonnet, swung the recently re-darned old cloak around her shoulders, and ran downstairs.

Mattie, sweeping the front hall, dropped her broom in consternation. "We thought you were all sleeping late, Miss Gillie! I'll tell Cook to—"

"No, no," Gillie interrupted, "I'm just going for a walk since I seem to be wide awake after all. I might find some mussels for tea."

It was too early for there to be many people around, save a few

servants and trades people. One old gentleman was helped out of a carriage at the bath house door, and managed to bow to her. Gillie hoped, somewhat doubtfully, that the Blackhaven waters would help him. But since natives of the town were hardly free of all disease themselves, she couldn't quite see why the water was now considered capable of curing strangers.

Still, the recent fad had brought new wealth to Blackhaven, and the surge of genteel visitors with little to do had made it possible for her card party scheme to prosper.

Gillie made her way to the bustling little harbor, exchanging greetings with the fishermen and the women she'd known all her life, and from there, down the steps to the beach. There, she walked over the sand until she was clear of the town. Then, having checked she was quite alone, she sat on a rock and removed her shoes and stockings, digging her toes into the soft, damp sand.

Holding the shoes, she rose and ran as fast as she could until she was breathless. Only then, feeling much more in charity with the world, did she remember to search the rocks for mussels, although in her haste, she'd forgotten to bring a bucket or box to put them in. However, the tide had left such a fine, fat harvest clinging to the rocks that in the end, she took off her old bonnet and dropped the plucked mussels in there instead.

It would smell for days, but it could be sponged and aired... eventually. She could wear her Sunday bonnet every day until then. Or, she thought recklessly, since they were now making a little money from the parties, she could even buy a new one and throw the fishy one out.

When her bonnet was full, she decided to clamber over the rocks and walk back along the road into town. So, she sat down on a rock, laying the bonnet, her shoes, and stockings beside her, and hitched up her skirt to brush the sand off one bare foot. Before she dragged on the stocking, she glanced up the beach toward Braithwaite Cove, just in case anyone from the castle was abroad.

The earl occasionally rode on the beach in the morning, but no doubt it was still too early for London gentlemen. Once, she thought she saw some movement along the jagged line of rocks, but if anyone was there, they obviously didn't see her.

With one stocking and shoe restored, she turned to brushing sand off the other foot. She still kept a weather eye on the stretch of beach leading towards the castle, but in the end, the riders took her by surprise by approaching from the other direction.

As the sound of hoofbeats on the soft sand finally penetrated her distracted mind, she jerked her head around. Three horsemen approached from the direction of the town. If they were castle people,

they must have been out for a much longer ride than she'd imagined...

Hastily, she dropped her cleaned foot back on to the sand and pushed down her skirts to cover it. With luck, they wouldn't notice her, and even if they did, would just ride past. In her old cloak she must look like a serving girl or even a fish wife.

At the last moment, she remembered to snatch the hood of the cloak over her bare head, and drew her bonnet into her lap, pretending to examine the mussels. Surreptitiously, she watched the horsemen canter onward. Their voices drifted across on the breeze. Southern voices. Gentlemen, but not officers from the 44th. In fact, since she didn't recognize their shapes, they could not be local. They must be Lord Braithwaite's guests at the castle. Something tugged unpleasantly at her stomach. Surely not Lord Wickenden...

Two of the gentlemen glanced in her direction, but to her relief, neither slowed nor acknowledged her.

At first. But just as she let out her breath, one of them reined in to a trot and glanced over again.

Oh no. Please not him...

It was impossible to tell at this distance. Likewise, it was impossible to rise and simply jump over the rocks where he couldn't follow when she had one bare foot and her shoe to carry along with a hat full of mussels. Her only choice was to poke dully at the mussels and pray he would find nothing of interest.

He spoke, and she was sure it was *his* voice speaking to his companions and then, damn him, whoever he was, he pulled on the reins and urged his horse toward her.

There was nothing she could do except remain motionless and wait. And prevent herself from biting her lip with consternation.

Still, it needn't be him. Whoever he was, he must be a gentleman and could be sent away just like the young officers of the 44th. She could live with the small humiliation of her awkward position, hatless and shoeless...if only it wasn't Wickenden.

It was.

His horse came to a halt a few yards away from her. Reluctantly, she met his gaze. Of course, his seat upon the large, chestnut horse was excellent, and his dark riding clothes impeccable. But considering what he'd said to her yesterday, she refused to admire anything about him.

He raised his hat. "Good morning."

"Good morning," she replied coldly. "As you see, it is only I and you may pass on without fear of missing anything or anyone."

To her surprise, his face lightened. He actually smiled. "That is more like you."

She lifted one eyebrow. "More like me than what?"

“Than the apologetic, timid creature of yesterday.”

She couldn't help glaring. “Sir, I am neither!”

“I believe you.” To Gillie's horror, he swung out of the saddle and, simply abandoning the horse, he walked toward her. “What brings you here?”

“I'm merely resting before walking home,” she said. But she'd already seen his gaze flicker to her shoe on the rock beside her. It was an old, well-worn shoe, she thought irrelevantly, and for some reason that added to her discomfort. Why hadn't she thought to hide the wretched thing behind her?

He halted directly in front of her. “Are you hurt?” There was no way to tell if he minded one way or the other.

“No,” she said flatly. “You may ride on to your friends without lacking chivalry. In fact, I wish you would.”

His lips twitched. “So you may put on your shoe with modest privacy?”

“Exactly,” she said defiantly.

He moved before she could even guess his intentions, reaching out for the shoe. At the last moment, she jerked toward it herself, but inevitably, he already held the shoe in his hands. He even drew her stocking from inside it.

Her cheeks flamed, and now it took courage not to look away. “Please show yourself to be the gentleman you claim to be. Give me those and ride on.”

“I've never claimed to be a gentleman. If I did, I would believe it more my duty to help a lady in distress.”

“I wasn't remotely distressed before you rode up,” she retorted.

“There's no need to be distressed at all. We all have feet, you know. Yours may be prettier than mine, of course, but the same is true of your face and you show me that without a fuss.”

She blinked. “It is no doubt faultless logic, but—”

She broke off in something approaching panic as he crouched in the sand and lifted her gown-covered foot onto his lap, where it poked out beyond the sandy hem of her drab gown. She wondered if it would be more ladylike to kick him or just stop making a fuss.

“Much prettier than mine,” he observed, and proceeded to brush the newly acquired sand off her sole. “Much softer and smoother, too.”

She caught her breath, for the stroking of his fingers on her sole was both peculiarly intimate and unexpectedly pleasurable. Little shocks thrilled through her whole body.

“Do you anoint them with oils and creams?” he inquired, with just a hint of teasing that would have been beguiling in any other circumstances.

She swallowed, "Of course not. I pay them only the barest attention."

The sweet torture of his fingers stopped, and with revealing deftness, he rolled up her stocking and began to draw it over her toes.

"Really, I can manage," she got out. "There is no need—"

"You'll only drop it back in the sand." The stocking slipped over her arch and heel, and he paused. His fingers moved, circling her ankle, and heat surged upwards. "So slender and tiny," he murmured.

Slowly, his gaze moved upward over her body to her face and held. Gillie couldn't breathe. His eyes were warm, as they'd been when he'd kissed her. Perhaps it was a trick of the morning sun, but little sparks seemed to jump there. She wanted to snatch her foot away and blister him with a verbal thrashing. And yet she didn't even know if she could move, let alone speak comprehensibly. She remembered the touch of his lips and the turbulence she'd known then returned with a vengeance.

And then his fingers loosened and he slipped the shoe onto her foot. She breathed again as he fastened it. The strange intensity of the moment had passed.

"I'll spare your blushes," he murmured. "And see you, no doubt, at tonight's ball. Don't eat any bad mussels."

With that, he rose to his feet and turned his back. Annoyingly, the horse hadn't even wandered away, merely nosed at a pile of seaweed while he scooped up the reins and vaulted into the saddle.

He tipped his hat in a gesture that seemed more mocking than civil. "Miss Muir."

And then she was simply gazing at his back as the horse trotted and then cantered across the sand away from her.

Her breath shuddered as she drew it in and exhaled. *What on earth just happened?*

*

THE CASTLE BALL, so long anticipated, no longer had the same appeal for Gillie. Still, at least the event would be large enough that she could avoid Lord Wickenden, especially if he cooperated and avoided her. Whatever the little scene on the beach had been about, he'd made his opinion of her quite plain, and on the whole, she thought he would keep away from her in public. Which was for the best, since she couldn't actually cut him in public either.

She did think—very briefly—about crying off in order to look after Smuggler Jack, who was now running a rather worrying fever. Doctor Morton had looked in on him again and changed his dressings, and given Dulcie advice on the best poultice to try and bring down his

fever. But Dulcie was adamant that nursing the smuggler was not Gillie's business.

"Well I brought him here," Gillie argued.

"Your brother brought his brandy here," Dulcie corrected. "You only organized it. And his comrades left him with us."

"I truly don't want him to die. He's a kind man. Did you send word to his wife?"

Dulcie shooed her from the room. "Of course I did as you bade me. Now do as I bid you, and go and dress for the ball!"

Her ballgown, which was new, a wicked extravagance made possible by the success of the card parties, had been her pride and joy. Now as her aunt helped her fasten it, she suspected it was unfashionable and inelegant by London standards. Of soft, diaphanous, pale green muslin, it was trimmed in silk of a darker shade around the high waist, neckline, and short little sleeves. She'd even found evening gloves of the same, darker shade.

"I suppose it will do," she said doubtfully.

"You look lovely," Aunt Margaret said warmly. "You will be the belle of the ball."

"Of course I won't," Gillie said with a laugh and gave her aunt a quick hug. "But we shall stick with simplicity and make a virtue of necessity. The pearls look beautiful with your gown."

"Thank you. Now sit still and let me see what I can do with your hair."

Twenty minutes later, Colonel Fredericks called. The retired commander of the 44th had offered to take the Muirs up to the castle in his ancient carriage, so at least they could arrive if not with style, then without having sweated their way up the hill on foot.

"The pleasure is all mine," Colonel Fredericks insisted when Aunt Margaret thanked him profusely. "I would far rather arrive with two beautiful ladies on my arm, than inspire pity as the lonely old widower!" He settled back in his seat as the carriage moved forward. "So, Bernard, how are your brandy stocks?"

Bernard blinked. "Fine. We've just replenished them. I'll send you over a few bottles if you wish."

The colonel wheezed out a laugh. "Lord, no, don't trouble yourself." He winked. "I have my own stock, as you probably know. I suppose it must all have been delivered as planned."

It was news to Gillie that Colonel Fredericks bought from the smugglers. However, it was more surprising that he was talking about it. In fact, he was gazing at Bernard as though expecting him to say something more. Perhaps he'd heard a rumor about Jack's misfortune.

"I suppose it must," Bernard agreed, looking out of the window.

Braithwaite Castle, once a great looming fortress guarding

Blackhaven Bay and Harbor, had, over the centuries, been turned into a large country residence without losing either its threatening presence or its spectacular views over the cliffs to the crashing waves below. Although there seemed to be no waves this evening, the sea barely rippled in the still air.

Gillie had been used to coming here since childhood, but she thought that if she had come upon it for the first time this evening, she would have been totally overwhelmed. The drive, the courtyard, and the public part of the house, were ablaze with light that complimented rather than outshone the moon's reflection in the sea.

For a couple of years, Gillie had shared a governess with two of the castle daughters, Ladies Serena and Frances, and had often found it difficult to concentrate on her work for gazing out of the window on the dizzying view of the sea, so different from the one she was used to from the town. Sometimes, it was hard to believe it was the same place.

Since the colonel gallantly gave Aunt Margaret his arm, Gillie entered the castle beside her brother. The ballroom had been converted from the old great hall – a massive room with a gallery where a rather fine orchestra played. Chandeliers containing hundreds of candles hung from the high ceiling and more light blazed from wall sconces, catching the glitter of the many diamonds adorning the guests. A sea of color greeted Gillie, the red and gold of the army officers, the gorgeous silks and muslins of the ladies. There were clearly several guests from London staying at the castle, mingling with the local gentry and town worthies.

The Dowager Countess of Braithwaite, as regal as ever, welcomed her guests with her son and one of her married daughters by her side. As always, she was most gracious to the Muirs, even tapped Gillie's wrist with her fan.

"We must have a little chat this evening, you and I."

"I'll look forward to it," Gillie said, faintly surprised, for although the countess had always been kind, particularly just after her father's death, they had never really been on "little chat" terms. Frances and Serena, however, launched themselves upon her with great delight for an exchange of news. Frances was married now, to an amiable Scottish lord, while Serena was engaged to a mere baronet with a large fortune.

Serena lowered her voice. "What is this we hear about your card parties, Gillie?"

Before Gillie could answer, the orchestra struck up the first dance, and all three young ladies were swept in different directions by their partners. Gillie's card had already been filled, largely with officers from the 44th, most of whom were regular attendees at the card

parties, so at least she wouldn't have to spend the evening as a wallflower under the pitying eyes of Lord Wickenden. Though in fact, she thought ruefully as she gazed around at the many interesting strangers around her, it was a little like dancing with your brothers.

At that moment, she caught sight of Wickenden himself, not dancing, but standing in a group of people who included one of the most beautiful women Gillie had ever seen. The baron, in perfectly fitting black satin breeches and evening coat, his shirt and cravat almost dazzlingly white, looked much as she'd first seen him, haughty, bored...and ripe, perhaps, for mischief.

No doubt the beautiful lady smiling up at him would be on the receiving end of his flirting tonight. It made Gillie hot and uncomfortable to imagine where that situation might end, where *she* might have if she hadn't been both naively shocked and prudish. But then he clearly hadn't regarded Gillie as a sophisticated equal worthy of a romantic liaison.

She'd lived with soldiers all her life, in however sheltered a fashion, she knew the words for what he'd imagined her to be. And despite her failed apology, she still itched to slap him for it.

His restless eyes suddenly shifted to the dance floor. Fortunately, it was her turn to dance down the line at that precise moment, so surely he wouldn't have known she'd been staring.

Conducted back to her aunt at the end of the dance by the very proper Lieutenant Green, Gillie was happy to find Lady Serena already keeping Aunt Margaret company. However, since there were several of the older lady's acquaintances present, Gillie soon found herself in private conversation with Serena once more.

"I'll tell you what Gillie," Serena confided. "I'm seriously considering throwing over Sir George for the wicked baron there."

Gillie's jaw dropped in dismay. "Seriously?"

Serena gave a peel of laughter. "Of course not seriously, you goose. Mama would kill me, for one thing. For another, I can't keep his attention for longer than thirty seconds. There's something about him, though...makes you wonder what he'd be like if he were just a little...different."

"That's silly," Gillie said flatly. "You can't like someone because you wish they were different. It makes no sense."

"Well, I do like him, though God knows why. He makes me laugh."

"I'm sure it's unintentional," Gillie said with a curl of her lip. "His main aim seems to be to entertain himself."

"You've met him?" Serena asked in surprise.

"Lord Braithwaite brought him to our card party last night. Who's the lady with him?"

"Lady Crowmore. Braithwaite says they almost married when he

was still only a younger son, but then she married Crowmore as a safer bet. I expect she's kicking herself now that Wickenden's as rich as Croesus. Still, they say Crowmore is about to croak, so who knows?" Serena sprang to her feet as the orchestra struck up the next country dance. "I shall be in trouble! I'll talk to you again at supper."

Gillie's next partner was Major Randolph, whom she'd always rather liked. In fact, when she was sixteen, she'd developed a crush on him, probably because he was tall and handsome and seemed both older and more sophisticated than the callow boys and junior officers of her acquaintance. She was almost surprised to remember that now as he led her into the dance, smiling.

"How good to see you looking more like yourself," he said warmly.

"What do you mean?" she asked. "Do I have a smudge on my nose? Has my hair escaped its pins?"

Randolph laughed, "No, no, you look charmingly, I assure you! I was just thinking aloud that light colors become you better. Or perhaps, they reflect a lighter heart. I hope so."

"Well, I have come with every intention of enjoying myself," she said firmly, deliberately keeping her attention on the dance and not on Lord Wickenden. "We all have."

She supposed she must have finally grown up in his eyes, for when the dance was finished, he brought her lemonade and stayed to chat with her and Aunt Margaret until her next partner claimed her.

It was just before the supper dance when Lord Braithwaite himself materialized at her elbow. "My mother has sent me to bring you to her," he said lightly. "Which works out perfectly, since I particularly want a word with you myself."

"Really?" she said, pausing to turn to her aunt. "Aunt Margaret, I'm going to the countess."

"Yes," Braithwaite pursued as they strolled across the ballroom. "It's about Wickenden."

"Do you know, I really don't want to hear any more about that man," she said firmly, and not quite truthfully.

"I don't blame you. I just want to reassure you that his bark is worse than his bite."

She curled her lip. "I assure you neither troubles me."

"Then he did offend you," Braithwaite said ruefully. "At least he means to apologize. I assured him you'd let him."

Then Braithwaite knew nothing of his visit yesterday morning. Or, hopefully, their encounter on the beach...

"Here she is, Mama," the earl added jovially as they found the countess, seated on a sofa beside a younger lady Gillie didn't know. The lady thoughtfully relinquished her seat and went off on Braithwaite's arm as Gillie took her place.

“Now, Gillie,” the countess said, with a sudden frown. “What’s all this I’ve been hearing about setting up a gambling den in your father’s house?”

Gillie laughed. “Oh no, my lady, it’s nothing like that. Merely card parties such as those my father used to hold.”

“For his brother officers and a few select friends.”

“Exactly.”

“But Gillie, you no longer have a connection to the regiment. You are charging subscriptions, I hear, and selling tickets at the door. To say nothing of your faro and hazard banks and the Lord knows what. You must see how this looks to the world. And I understand you invite more than old friends. The complete strangers who’ve flocked to the town for the spring water in the last year or two, people your aunt certainly doesn’t know.”

“I have never encountered any but gentlemen,” Gillie said stiffly. *Apart from your own guest*, she thought mutinously.

“But no ladies,” the countess said significantly. “Does that not tell you anything?”

“That most ladies do not care for cards.”

The countess narrowed her eyes as though wondering if Gillie were being insolent or merely obtuse.

“Besides, ladies do come,” Gillie added hastily. “The Misses Dundas and Mrs. Percy are frequent visitors. You yourself would be most welcome and I assure you you’d find nothing to disgust you.”

“No, I don’t believe I would,” the countess said with a sigh, “which is what makes this harder. I’ve known you and your parents since you were a child. I know there is no harm or vice in you whatsoever, but it is a matter of perception, and trust me, the world will not see what I do. For a penniless girl like yourself, reputation is everything. You aren’t just ruining your chances of a good match. You’re ruining your chances of *any* match. You must stop before it goes any further.”

Gillie drew a deep breath, trying to calm the surge of outrage at this interference. “I am very sensible of your good nature as well as your good advice, which I know you mean for the best. But the blunt truth is that if it were not for the card parties, my aunt, brother, and myself would have nowhere to live. We have chosen to rely on our own resources rather than on those of some mythical husband of the future.”

The orchestra had begun the introduction to the waltz and she caught sight of Kit Grantham coming to fetch her. “My waltz partner,” she explained to Lady Braithwaite. “Please excuse me.”

“So long as you understand,” Lady Braithwaite said as she rose, “that I would not allow my daughters to be seen in your house now. Ever.”

Gillie felt her eyes sting with fury and something very like shame, even though she had never done anything to be ashamed of. Forcing herself, she smiled up at Kit and entered into the waltz with enthusiasm.

"I've been away too long, haven't I?" Kit said ruefully.

"We've all missed you," Gillie assured him.

"Well, I wish I'd been here. I would never have advised you to begin these card parties."

Gillie cast her eyes to heaven. "Oh for the love of—"

"Gillie, they're not at all the thing," he said earnestly.

"It didn't stop you coming," she retorted.

"And now I've seen what's actually happening there. Your father wouldn't like it."

"My father would probably wish he'd thought of it first!" she retorted. "And you have no right to quote his supposed wishes to me."

"Then give me the right," he said at once. "Marry me."

Her feet stumbled. "I beg your pardon?"

"It would be for the best."

She stared at him, tugging her hand free and coming to a halt. Of all the reasons to propose marriage that was the worst. "No, it wouldn't! You're *judging* me! Wrongly! There is nothing for you to forgive me!"

"Gillie—" he began helplessly, glancing around him to see if their confrontation was noticed. Which was when his braided red coat was eclipsed by a plain black one.

"Never leave a lady standing," Lord Wickenden reproved, and simply took her in his arms and returned her to the waltz as if no break had occurred.

Chapter Four

FOR ONCE IN her life, Gillie could think of nothing to say. After their last few encounters, she hadn't expected him to come near her in public. Now that he had, she was wildly suspicious. On top of which, the waltz was still considered fast in some quarters and she wasn't yet used to dancing so intimately with a man. Waltzing with a stranger seemed to be very different to doing so with her brother or with an old friend like Kit Grantham.

"What are you doing?" she blurted.

"Waltzing," he said in apparent surprise.

"Why?" she asked bluntly.

A hint of amusement sparked in his rather hard grey eyes. "What a suspicious little creature you are. Don't you know?"

"After our conversation yesterday, I hate to imagine."

"You were making a scene," he said tranquilly. "I decided to make you talked of for other reasons."

She curled her lip, "Because I have been granted the stupendous honor of dancing with the great Lord Wickenden?"

"Sadly, yes."

She narrowed her eyes mistrustfully. "Why sad?"

"I have to agree with you it is a dire commentary on our society that anyone pays a blind bit of attention to anything I do, but there you are."

"Are you trying to ruin me?" she asked bluntly.

Both devil's eyebrows shout up. "Of course. Having had my amorous advances rejected and then being thrown out of your genteel gambling den, there's nothing else I can do. I, too, have a reputation to consider."

Uncertainly, she searched his veiled face. "I don't believe you."

"Then why do you look so frightened?"

"I am not remotely frightened!" she exclaimed.

"Oh good," He turned her, dancing her directly toward the balcony door, "Then let me show you the spectacular view from the terrace."

"Absolutely not." In panic, she tried to tug her hand free, but his grip tightened.

"Hush," he said as though gentling a horse. He even stroked the soft skin between her thumb and forefinger, making her shiver with apprehension. At least it might have been apprehension. "I was only

joking you. In fact, my plan for your rehabilitation depends on my flirting with total respect.”

She had the terrible feeling that her jaw had dropped again. Hastily, she closed her mouth, then, barely opening it again, she uttered, “I do not need rehabilitating.”

“I beg to differ. Lady Braithwaite thinks otherwise. So does Captain Grantham by the look of him and his quarrelsome face. You can’t blame them. If I was your friend, I’d tell you the same thing.”

“You are not,” she pointed out in a small, hard voice, “my friend.”

“No, I’m not, which is why I can say I actually admire what you’re doing. In many ways it’s preferable to selling yourself to a rich or even a merely respectable husband.”

A thousand thoughts flitted through her mind at once. He must have overheard her conversation with the countess. He understood. It was a trick to win her confidence and ruin her from spite. He was making fun of her.

“You are deluded,” she said. “Even up here in provincial ignorance, no one would believe *you* would ever look at me. Respectably, at least.”

“My dear, observe,” he drawled. “All eyes are upon us. And mine are upon you.”

Appalled, she glanced around and discovered he was right. Surreptitious glances from the dance floor, quickly averted. More blatant observation from beyond, and from the gallery above.

Her eyes stung. More than anger, the injustice seemed to paralyze her. Only his relentless arm at her back kept her moving.

He said, “I never dance. Yet I waltz with you and take you into supper.”

“Why?” she said. “You really ask me to believe your one desire is to save my reputation?”

His eyes sparked, an echo of the flustering warmth she’d glimpsed there before. When he’d kissed her. “God, no, it wouldn’t be remotely true. Look on it as an experiment. A wager, if you like.”

She eyed him with fresh suspicion. “What do you mean?”

He shrugged without disrupting the grace of his steps. “If my attentions do you social harm – or even if they simply do you no good – then you were right and you win.”

“Win what?”

He appeared to consider. “I’ll buy your little gambling den at a fair business price and run it accordingly. You and your brother would then have the financial freedom to go anywhere, do anything you liked.”

She couldn’t look away. And yet it was all nonsense. It had to be. “And if I lose?” she asked, at last. “If the countess decides I am

respectable after all simply because you deign to dance with me?"

"Oh I think we need to give it more than one dance. A few days. Then you'll lose."

"And what will I owe you?"

"If you accept the wager? A kiss seems fair."

"No, it doesn't," she said, struggling and failing to subdue the flush rising to her cheeks.

"You are so sure you'll lose?"

"I won't lose!"

"Excellent. Then it's a wager. Now, let me take you to supper."

*

BERNARD, HAVING SUSTAINED a lecture from the countess on the subject of dishonoring himself, his father's memory, and his sister by holding card parties, felt somewhat hot under the collar. He remembered he hadn't wanted to be here in the first place. He wasn't much of a dancing man. His tastes tended more toward sport – especially boxing, racing, and cock-fighting – and cards.

With that in mind, he decided to calm his uneasy spirit in the card room with some like-minded gentlemen – especially when he saw Gillie with the countess. Judging by her expression of defiant outrage, hastily but imperfectly covered, she was receiving much the same lecture as Bernard.

He halted, wondering vaguely if he should rescue her. While he hesitated, Kit Grantham approached, presumably for the next dance. Bernard breathed a sigh of relief, for he really didn't want to think about the damned card parties any more. He made his way through the groups clustered around the dance floor, pausing occasionally to speak to friends and acquaintances on the way. At least he didn't have to contend with mothers trying to make him dance with their dull or frumpy daughters.

Beside him, as he halted politely to let two ladies cross his path, a woman spoke in a low, rather delicious voice. "Oh, who is that causing a scene, Wickenden? Is it the scandalous young lady who runs the local gambling den?"

Bernard snapped his head around, a flush of anger not untinged with shame surging into his face, and a sharp set-down already forming on his lips.

He never spoke it. Quite simply, the lady who should have been on the receiving end took his breath away. Never in his life had he set eyes on someone so beautiful and so desirable.

Her glossy hair was fashionably dark, her eyes languid and mysterious under perfectly arched brows. Her nose was refined and

pretty, her mouth small and full and eminently kissable. She was an elegantly tall lady, nearer thirty than twenty, he guessed, and her gown of pure white silk and red gauze was stunning. Just for an instant, Bernard was paralyzed. And it was left to the wicked baron to defend his sister.

"Scandalous? My dear Kate, you've been listening to the wrong gossip," Wickenden drawled. He dragged his apparently bored eyes from the dance floor to Bernard's no doubt flabbergasted face. "There is no scandal. Ask her brother. Let me present Mr. Muir to you. Mr. Muir, Lady Crowmore."

And as the baron strolled away with a mocking bow, Bernard found himself alone with the divine creature who'd insulted his sister. How the devil was one supposed to deal with such a situation? This was exactly why he hated such damned affairs.

The breathtaking Lady Crowmore dealt with the matter for him by giving him one languid, gloved hand. "Mr. Muir. How do you do? Do you know, I imagined you would be older?"

"I'm old enough," Bernard said belligerently.

Lady Crowmore smiled, "Old enough for what?" she enquired. "To waltz?"

Only the last vestiges of good manners prevented his jaw from dropping. The divine lady was asking him to waltz with her.

"Truly?" he said in amazement, then flushed even redder. "That is, I assumed your dance card would be filled. Twice over."

"Well it is," she said carelessly. "But I always leave one waltz free in case someone takes my fancy." She smiled dazzlingly and Bernard's downfall was complete. "Thank you, sir, I would love to waltz with you."

In a daze, Bernard led her on to the floor. It came to him that all eyes must be upon him in envy for his beautiful partner. A surreptitious glance showed him to no such thing. In fact, attention seemed to be largely on another couple.

Gillie, dancing with...Lord Wickenden.

"She's meant to be dancing with Kit," he blurted.

"Ah well, Wickenden can be most persuasive," Lady Crowmore murmured.

Bernard frowned. "I'm not sure I like him *persuading* my sister!"

"Well, if you want to draw further attention to her, just keep scowling at his back," Lady Crowmore advised.

Bernard brought his gaze back to the beautiful woman dancing in his arms and swallowed, consigning Gillie and Wickenden to the devil, at least temporarily.

FROM THE MOMENT Lord Wickenden swept Gillie into the waltz, the evening took on a kind of unreality for her, almost like the night she'd met him when she'd imagined the elegant, fascinating stranger had truly admired her. This time she understood perfectly that he was amusing himself with the ridiculous wager, to which she hadn't even agreed. For one thing, she had no desire to sell her home – hence the card parties.

On the other hand, there was a certain, reprehensible satisfaction in observing the jealous and discontented faces of certain acquaintances, such as the squire's wife and daughter who had always lorded it over her in the past as if they were immeasurably above her. And yet, astonishingly, it was she who sat next to the earl's most honored guest at supper.

Even more amazingly, she found herself to be well entertained. He talked lightly, humorously, on many subjects. Her first riposte, like her first laugh, was quite involuntary, they simply escaped her lips. And after that, she simply enjoyed it, because in the midst of company, the man was fun.

Alone, of course, he was a different matter, a danger to be avoided at all costs.

But it seemed he was sticking to the rules of his bizarre experiment, for he made no effort to separate her from the company. On the contrary, after supper, he very properly conducted her back to her aunt, bowed, and left her.

And yet, as she danced the next country dance with Captain Graham, she couldn't quite help a guilty feeling of anticlimax, as if the excitement had gone from her evening along with Lord Wickenden, who was now nowhere to be seen.

Lady Serena seized her as soon as the dance was over, whisking her out of the ballroom, not onto the terrace, but out of one of the castle's side doors to the wilder ground that overlooked the cliffs.

"It's cooler and a lot more private out here," she said, although she shivered in her thin muslin dress and grasped Gillie's arm as if for warmth. "Now, tell me all. How did you tame the wicked baron?"

"Tame him?" Gillie repeated in astonishment. "I only danced with him! Once!"

"Yes but the wicked baron never dances. It's laziness, of course, because he wants to avoid having to converse with gauche and tongue-tied debutantes. If he doesn't dance with anyone then no one can take offense. But he *did* dance with you."

So that part was true. She frowned as she gazed out over the sea. It was perfectly still, like dark glass. Hiding its true danger, like Wickenden's face. "He's up to something. I just can't quite work out what. And yet why should he bother? I'm no one."

"Well, I wouldn't put it quite like that," Serena said with a friendly nudge, "but I take your point. You are no one great by the standards of the world and Wickenden may look as high as he likes. Still, it's you he's looking at."

"Oh, he isn't *really*," Gillie exclaimed, and yet a small voice whispered in her ear, wondering how it would feel if he actually pursued her in earnest instead of for experimentation, wagers, revenge, or whatever it was he was actually doing.

She shivered, although she no longer felt cold, and hastily withdrew her arm before Serena could feel her agitation. "Come, let's go back inside or we'll both get a mighty scold from your mother."

"Good idea," Serena said at once, hurrying back toward the door. "I've had enough of her scolds for one week."

"Why, what have you done?" Gillie asked, following more slowly.

"Nothing. But we had a bit of a row when she wouldn't let me call on you this afternoon. And I particularly wanted to—so did Frances—because we haven't seen you since your father died and letters just aren't the same—Gillie!"

The last came out on a scream as something hurled itself through the darkness straight at Gillie, sweeping her off her feet and onward, almost without a break. She shouted, lashing out instinctively with both hands and feet. Some of her blows hit home, encouraging her to continue struggling, but although her captor grunted, he didn't release her. In fact, his fist crashed down toward her stomach and the world exploded in pain.

*

LORD WICKENDEN, in fact, had overheard neither of Gillie Muir's difficult conversations. From his covert observation in the center of a group of sycophants who'd followed Braithwaite up from London, and then more privately with Kate Crowmore, he'd seen only that she was distressed.

He wasn't quite sure what happened to him after that, only that his determination to have nothing more to do with the wretched girl flew out of the window. And when she went almost immediately from the countess's scolding to that of Lillian's son, Kit Grantham, who should have been entertaining her, he thought only of rescuing her from public spectacle and making her smile. Or at least rousing her spirits enough to quarrel with him. Once more, he doubted that Gillyflower Muir had any intention of marrying Lillian's son. Though he couldn't speak for young Captain Grantham's intentions.

There shouldn't have been quite so much pleasure in holding and guiding the girl's furious little body as they danced. She followed his

lead without thought. Quarrelling with him even relaxed her enough to display the natural grace that tempted him to hold her closer. Nor had he expected to enjoy her company quite so much at supper that he was reluctant to part with her as both etiquette and his own plan required. Instead, he was reminded so forcefully of why and how he'd pursued her that first evening, that he left the ballroom for his own bedchamber to pace away his lustful thoughts.

Throwing open the casement to let in the cool, salty scent of the sea, he wished she wasn't a lady, for she would make a wonderfully quirky mistress of whom he was unlikely to tire. He knew he could seduce her into it, too, in the end. It had been in her kiss before he'd spoiled things with a rare but spectacular moment of crass insensitivity. He'd felt it in her erratic breathing when he'd boldly caressed her bare foot under pretense of cleaning it. And it was still there in her physical reactions to his presence tonight. But she didn't understand the game. It wasn't in her nature or her upbringing. And besides, it took him by surprise to realize he would not willingly cause her unhappiness.

Extraordinary selflessness, he mocked himself as he paused by the open casement, considering he barely knew her. But he was already in danger of obsession; he could imagine he heard her voice.

He thrust his head out of the open casement and saw below him two young women, both easily recognized in the glow of light from the castle. One was Lady Serena Conway, Braithwaite's youngest sister, and she was holding the arm of Gillie Muir while they talked in low voices. For probably the first time in his life, Wickenden was conscious of a desire to listen to female confidences. Curling his lip at himself, he began to withdraw his head back inside the window when some movement at the corner of his eye caught his attention.

A shadow was moving at the edge of the cliff, slowly, stealthily approaching the two women below in a manner that was truly alarming.

Wickenden could have yelled a warning to the young ladies, but he didn't want to precipitate the threat – the man below could have been armed. So he simply bolted across the room and out the door, flying along the deserted passage and down the stairs that led to the side door. As soon as he wrenched it open, a female figure fell into his arms with a scream.

Lady Serena.

"Help her!" she sobbed. "He took Gillie!"

"Who did?" Wickenden demanded, forcing himself not to shake the information from her.

"No idea! He flew out of nowhere and grabbed her, dragged her off kicking and screaming."

“Which direction?”

Serena pointed to the right of the doorway where, as Wickenden recalled, a footpath led a winding way down to the beach.

“How many?” he asked grimly.

“Just the one that I saw, but there could be others.”

Instinct told him speed was of the essence here. But his cool brain always considered a whole situation, and he was well aware that, although her safety was paramount, in her particular circumstances, she really didn’t need a scandal, even one not of her making.

“If I don’t find her, I’ll raise the alarm,” he said, as he hauled the lantern from the wall beside the door. “Until then, do nothing, say nothing. Go back and pretend nothing’s happened. Except to the aunt. Give me half an hour, then contrive to take her out of the ballroom and send her home in a carriage, tell her Gillie’s angry or unwell or something.”

He flung the last over his shoulder at her stunned face as he sprinted across the rough ground to the cliff path and began to descend, wrestling off his perfectly fitting evening coat as he went. It restricted his movement, and in any case, it would provide a useful shade for his lantern if necessary.

Chapter Five

AFTER THE FIRST shock of the blow, Gillie was too busy to be frightened, first trying to breathe through the pain and nausea, and then trying to free herself. Only gradually did the fear begin to sink in, as she realized that whoever held her was immeasurably stronger than she, and that he was dragging her away from her friends. And she couldn't prevent it. Particularly not after a second man pressed something cold and sharp to her throat and growled at her in a low and menacing voice that if she didn't come quietly, he'd cut her throat.

After that, she was too frightened even to ask where they were taking her. Instead, she tried to concentrate on where they were going—down the winding cliffside path toward Braithwaite Cove. At least she slowed their progress as much as she could, catching her dress on the wild brambles, tripping over, feeling her way in the darkness. Surely Serena would raise the alarm and people would be looking for her...

In the end, she didn't have to ask what they wanted, for as soon as they reached the beach, they pushed her to her knees and demanded, "Where is the passage?"

It was so totally unexpected that for a moment she could only stare from one dark figure to the other. "What passage?" she asked at last.

"Don't play that game with us," snarled the man who'd held her. He was bigger and brawnier than his friend with the knife. "You know damned well what passage! The one that leads from here to your cellar."

"But...but there is no such passage," she assured them earnestly.

There wasn't. The only secret passage she knew of ran from her cellar to a cave in the Black Cove, not Braithwaite Cove. To get them mixed up, the men were clearly not local. Although, she was fairly sure smugglers frequented this cove, too. It was ideal when the castle was deserted for large parts of the year, with any remaining staff living in the newer and less exposed wings on the other side.

One of the men shoved her hard and she fell back against the rocks. "Don't give us that!" he growled. "We know! So just—" Quite suddenly, he broke off, at exactly the same time as a loud thud sent him sprawling to the ground. A thick stick landed beside him just as someone leapt through the darkness and felled her second attacker

with an audible crack.

Appalled, Gillie wondered if she'd been dragged into a war between smuggler factions. It would explain why her abductors hadn't known all the details about the tunnel. Though not why they'd chosen to antagonize a buyer in such a way...

Forcing herself upright while the lone attacker hastily searched the still bodies, she began to edge along the cliff toward the path.

An instant later, the lone man swung around, her abductor's knife gleaming in the moonlight as he gazed right at her. Surely, there was something familiar about him—one of her own smugglers? Surely such a man would not hurt her? He strode toward her and she halted, paralyzed by the knowledge that she couldn't outrun him or save herself.

"Gillie? Are you hurt?"

Baffled by the context, she took a moment to recognize his voice. "Lord Wickenden?"

"Don't sound so surprised."

She stared up at him as he put an arm around her shoulders, easing her back off the rocks where she seemed to be clinging like the proverbial limpet.

"You're freezing," he said gently. She hadn't known he could sound like that. "Come with me. I have a coat somewhere, if we can find the lantern."

"What about them?" Gillie asked, glancing back over her shoulder at her comatose abductors, even as she longed to sink weakly into her rescuer's embrace.

"We could send the soldiers—or the town Watch—to pick them up."

"What if the tide comes in before they wake up?"

"I won't shed any tears for them," Wickenden said coldly. "Will you?"

She thought about it, then shook her head. "I don't think so." She shivered.

"Did they hurt you?" he asked, his voice mild, as if he didn't much care.

She shook her head again, although her stomach still ached to the point of sickness.

"What did they want with you?"

"They wanted to know about a secret passage leading from the cove here to our cellar. But there isn't one."

He paused, bending, and light blinded her as he pulled some dark material from a lantern. An instant later, she felt the warmth of a fine, wool coat around her shoulders, and she smiled at him in sheer gratitude.

"How did you find me?" she asked, curious at last.

"I ran into Serena Conway."

"Oh dear, Bernie and my aunt will be worried sick!"

"Well, if I can get word to her in time, they'll never know."

Gillie frowned. "Word?"

"Or you can go back to the ball, but I'm afraid your current appearance – especially with me in tow – would cause comment."

Instinctively, she reached up to her tumbled hair, and remembered the several ripping noises she'd heard on her way down the cliffs. She was probably covered in mud and sand, too.

"Oh the devil," she said shakily and not quite properly. "This was a new gown." She came to a halt, looking up at him. "I can't go back like this, can I? At the very least, Lady Braithwaite will blame it on my new lifestyle. Bernie will be after blood and my aunt will have palpitations. And Kit—" She broke off with a quick, hoarse laugh.

"Kit?"

"An old friend who has suddenly decided I have to marry him to retrieve my respectability."

"And what do you think?" Wickenden asked calmly.

"That it would be a thoroughly unrespectable reason to marry anyone."

"Do you want to marry him for a different reason?"

"Lord, no, I don't want to marry anyone, let alone someone who's almost my bro—" She broke off again. "Why am I even talking about this?" She frowned to concentrate her mind, though her body showed an annoying tendency to tremble. She clutched Wickenden's coat more closely around her and glanced at him. "You must be colder than I," she said ruefully.

"Nonsense," he said, throwing an arm around her shoulders again and pulling her into his body as they walked. She understood it was for warmth and, perhaps, comfort, and she couldn't deny herself, at least for a few moments. On the other hand, she was no milksop.

"You don't need to come with me," she said. "In fact, if you would do me a favor, you would go back to the ball and tell my aunt I've gone home. And make sure Serena knows –."

"You can't walk through the town in this condition. Let me fetch you a carriage and your aunt."

"There's no need," she insisted. "I can get home without being seen."

"How?"

"It doesn't matter," she said hastily. "Truly, if you would just—"

"I won't leave you until you're safely home."

She would have argued the point, only there were the two unconscious men on the beach who might reawaken at any moment. "Very well, but we'll need to hurry before the tide comes in."

The deep, ugly sick feeling seemed to have faded from her stomach, leaving only a residue of mild pain. In fact, it felt curiously pleasant to be walking in the sand with Lord Wickenden's arm around her and the warmth from his body seeping into her side. She knew he only held her for the same reason he'd given her his coat—to keep the cold at bay. Perhaps that was the reason she felt no urge to pull away from him.

"You're not at all what you seem, are you?" she said, thinking aloud.

"Why, what do I seem?"

"A bored dandy, appalled by his provincial surroundings," she said frankly, then cast him a surreptitious glance to see if her unruly tongue had offended him.

It seemed not. "I might take issue with the word dandy, but on the whole that describes me fairly well."

"Then why did you come?" she asked curiously. "I doubt London is devoid of entertainment at this time of year."

He sighed. "A number of reasons, chief of which being it was deemed sensible for me to leave the capital for a while."

"Why?"

"I shot a man in a duel," he said. "If he dies, I'm told they'll clap me up this time."

"Why?" she asked, peering at him in the darkness.

He shrugged. "It's not my first offense of that kind."

"No, I mean why did you shoot him? Why did you fight this duel?"

"I forget, but I'm sure the reasons were too sordid and trivial to repeat." He dropped his arm from her shoulders to clamber over the rocks, then reached back to take her hand and help her. Although she was more than capable of scrambling over rocks herself – even in a torn ball gown – she rather liked his care. Which sat very oddly with his reputation.

As she landed safely beside him on the sand, she stopped and frowned up at him. She knew he hadn't really forgotten the reason for his duel, but understood he would never tell her. Despite her curiosity, it was probably best not to know.

"Why did you help me tonight?" she asked instead.

The light from the lantern cast half his handsome face into shadow. The half she could see didn't smile. "Because I could."

Her gaze fell to his hand still holding hers, His knuckles were bleeding.

"Thank you," she said, with difficulty but complete sincerity.

"Think nothing of it," he drawled, moving forward, although he still held her hand, "I can't win my wager if you're dead or at the mercy of smugglers."

She waved that aside. "A kiss," she said disparagingly. "I cannot think you are the sort of man who needs wagers to win himself kisses!"

"Is that a compliment?" he asked after a moment.

She laughed. "Yes, I suppose it is. But don't let it go to your head. I'm sure I'll insult you again before long."

Unexpectedly, he flung his arm around her waist, swinging her to an abrupt halt against his body. "Don't treat me like your brother, or all those surrogate brothers who surround you." His eyes seemed to flash, although it might have been a trick of the moonlight. "I can't be kept in line by coaxing and flattery and the occasional scold."

Baffled and not a little angered by all his changes of mood, she tried to throw him off. "Oh for goodness sake, what do you want of me?" she exclaimed.

He held her still without difficulty. "I told you. Another kiss."

For dignity's sake, she gave up trying to push him away, although she did curl her lip. "You go to a lot of trouble for something of no value!"

"No value? To you or to me?"

"To either of us!"

He swooped, locking his mouth to hers in a kiss that was almost bruising. This was nothing like the sweet explorative embrace that had so entranced her the first night. Hard, fierce, demanding, it would have frightened her had everything in her not leapt in wild, instinctive response – a response she'd no real idea how to make. She could only cling to his lips, while arousal she'd never dreamed of battered at her.

Very gradually, his mouth gentled and loosened. "There," he said, against her lips. "Deny that has value. It certainly has to me."

She said shakily, "You can't save my reputation and ruin me at the same time."

A breath of surprised laughter stirred her lips. "A wager for another day, perhaps. Come, we've dallied enough in the cold. Where the devil are we going?"

Bemused all over again by his sudden shift from passion to detached interest in his surroundings, she said. "To the Black Cove. It's just around the next headland."

"How does the Black Cove help us? Your house isn't on the beach."

"No, but there is a tunnel," she confessed. "I think it's the one these horrible men were looking for. There's no other that runs into our cellar."

He eyed her with something approaching admiration. Annoyingly, she wanted to preen. "Your sick servant isn't a servant, is he? He's a smuggler."

"The soldiers patrolling the coast shot him," she admitted.

"You really do run a disorderly house, don't you?"

"I most certainly do not! You've just caught us at a bad moment. We couldn't let Jack die. He's an old friend and he has a wife and four children dependent on him."

"Maybe he should have thought of them before he took to smuggling."

"I think he did. Fishing isn't as lucrative." She sighed. "It isn't fair, is it? If *you* kill a man, you just leave the country until it all blows over or you've influenced the powers that be to pardon you. But if Jack just deprives the government of a little revenue, then he's instantly hanged."

"There's a little more to it than that," Wickenden said, "Bonaparte is using smuggled goods to try and break the British economy. Besides, our smugglers take him information and escaped prisoners of war."

"I know it happens," Gillie confessed. "But truly, Jack would have no information to give if he tried. He only brings contraband north, and anyway, it's never anything that competes with British goods."

"And the men who attacked you?"

She frowned, shuddering as the memory rushed to the forefront of her mind. "I don't know. A rival set of smugglers perhaps. Or French spies?"

"Someone who knows what you look like," Wickenden pointed out, "and has connected you to the tunnel. You're going to have to take care until we sort this out. How many menservants do you have?"

"Just Danny," she admitted, "and Charles the young footman. But it makes no sense. If they want to use my cellar and my tunnel, why antagonize me?"

He nodded. "It's as if they want to be in and out quickly. What do you have that they might want?"

"Brandy?" she said doubtfully. "Unless they mean to rob us one night after a party."

"Then why give you warning by attacking you? They'd surely be better off just listening to tavern tattle and then acting on that. Is this your Black Cove?"

"It is." Taking the lantern from him, she walked around the rocks, avoiding the rippling waves threatening to run over her feet. She clambered over the rocks, helping herself with one hand and trying not to slide in her ruined dancing slippers. "I haven't used the tunnel for years, not since Bernie and I were children. But it should be round about here..." Pushing past a bramble bush, she held the lantern high to expose a hidden cavern.

Wickenden pulled the brambles back, peering over her shoulder.

"There doesn't seem to be anything there."

"That's the beauty." She scrambled inside, walking into what looked like the narrowest, darkest corner, which, in fact, hid the opening to a much wider cave and a long, winding tunnel. "Our house is old," she remarked. "Although the front portion was built only fifty years or so ago, the back probably dates to Elizabethan times. We think the tunnel was probably an escape route for rebels and Catholics, originally, though smugglers have been making use of it for as long as anyone remembers."

"Then it's always been your family's house?"

"My mother's family. She and my father inherited it from my grandfather."

"So you always knew about the tunnel? You must have had fun here as a child."

She smiled at the memory. "Oh we did! Which is another reason we didn't want to give up the house after my father died."

"You have roots here," he said without emphasis, yet something in his voice made her glance back over her shoulder at him, raising the lantern. He took it from her.

"Don't you own your own land?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Mostly, I resent it."

She blinked. "You resent your own land?"

"Call me ungrateful, overprivileged and perverse."

"You find it a burden?" she guessed. "You don't care for the responsibility?"

He shrugged. "I've never minded responsibility. It was just a different sort I had in mind. My brother was meant to have the lands and titles, not me. I thought I could choose my own path. What is that?"

The inevitable question died on her lips as she followed his pointing finger to a crumpled object on the tunnel floor. It stood out on the gravelly, sandy stone – as did the splatters of blood which she hadn't noticed until now. Bending, she picked up the paper with a grunt at the sudden pain her stomach.

At once, he caught her arm, easing her upright. "What is it?"

"Nothing. I think I must have been bruised in the struggle."

"Where?" he demanded.

In spite of herself and the unromantic nature of the conversation, she flushed, brushing her hand across her stomach.

In the lantern light his eyes and lips narrowed. "I wish I'd hit them harder."

"I think you hit them hard enough," she said, touching his hand with the cut knuckles without thought.

Immediately embarrassed, she began uncrumpling the paper she'd

picked off the floor.

"Read it in the comfort of your house," he advised. "We should hurry."

Drawing nearer their goal made her think of something else. "Do you think you could break open a locked door?"

He eyed her with misgivings. "Your cellar door is locked, isn't it?"

"It certainly should be. Although it wasn't on the night of the card party, when you went in search of entertainment."

"So that's why you were so terrified of me being there."

"That and the smuggler in the cellar. And the contraband."

"And yet barely twenty-four hours later you trust me with all of that and more."

"Well, you did save me from the men who abducted me," she excused herself. "You are clearly trustworthy *up to a point*."

"And what point would that be?"

"The one that entertains you."

"But you entertain me," he said, catching her hand and threading his fingers through hers.

Her hand jumped in his as she instinctively made to snatch it back, before deciding she shouldn't accord it so much importance. Instead, she lifted her chin and looked him in the eyes. "My point exactly. You have promised to protect my reputation."

He smiled, his teeth showing in the lantern light, somehow accentuating his satanic appearance. "You haven't quite got the hang of reputation in society, have you? It means bowing strictly to the rules of etiquette *in public*. I assure you, in company I shall be most punctilious."

"Meaning that in private you will behave like a cad?" she flung at him.

Deliberately, he stopped and set down the lantern. She whisked up her free hand to ward him off, but he simply seized it and pushed it behind her back, drawing her close into his body before he bent his head.

Her breath came in short pants because some indignant part of her longed to throw him off, even while the butterflies leapt around her stomach in sheer anticipation. His eyes had darkened like mysterious, impossibly profound caverns.

"It seems so." His voice wasn't quite steady. There might even have been regret in there, although for what she couldn't begin to guess. "You're too damned...alluring."

And for the second time that night, his mouth took hers, deeply, blatantly sensual. Telling herself it would be undignified to resist, she didn't. But within moments, her fingers had curled around his hand and her lips were trembling under the onslaught of his. His tongue

invaded, devastating her. He pressed her closer into his hips while his other hand released hers and slid upward from her waist to her breast.

She opened her mouth in a gasp and that was even worse – or better, for the kiss deepened at once, overwhelming her utterly.

“What are you doing?” she gasped into his mouth.

He groaned and lifted his head. “Damned if I know, but it’s—” He never finished his sentence but delved and kissed her again until she could barely breathe. And yet as soon as she struggled, he released her. “Christ, I’m sorry. How could I forget he hit you?”

“I’m not hurt,” she said shakily. “But I won’t allow this.”

A smile flickered on his lips and vanished. “We’ll see.”

And unkind man might have pointed out that she already had allowed it, several times now. At least he didn’t do that. He simply picked up the lantern and walked on, still holding her hand. Somehow, it seemed churlish to remove it.

They came at last into the large chamber below the house. The recent supply of barrels and bottles lined the walls and were stacked on shelves carved out of the wall.

“I suppose it would be easier to break down the door if you had sturdier boots on,” Gillie said anxiously. “I’m afraid if you use your shoulder, you’ll only damage it.”

“Well, let’s try knocking before we do anything so drastic,” Wickenden proposed.

Accordingly, Gillie slipped her hand free of his, and though it felt cold, she hurried up to the cellar door and rapped smartly. At the very least, she was prepared for several attempts, but to her surprise, the key turned in the opposite side almost immediately.

Smiling, Gillie parted her lips to call out in relief but before she could, a pistol muzzle eased through the slowly opening door. In a trice, Wickenden leapt in front of her, grabbed the pistol by the barrel and yanked it downward.

The unmistakable sound of Danny swearing assailed her ears. An instant later, Danny himself fell inside, almost meeting Wickenden’s clenched fist, though at the last minute, the baron drew back and released him.

Danny gaped from one of them to the other. Light from the hallway spilled inside to join the lantern light, allowing him to take in their disarrayed state.

“If you’ve hurt a hair on her head, I will kill you,” Danny said grimly.

“Of course he hasn’t, Danny,” Gillie said crossly. “In fact, he rescued me from a pair of villains.”

Danny scowled at that. “Pair of villains? Same ones who came round here?”

“Who came round here?” Wickenden demanded. “What did they want?”

“Two blokes, tried to tell me they were here to see Miss Muir and when I sent them packing, they tried to break in. I showed them Flossie here.” He picked up the pistol which had dropped to the floor during his tussle with Wickenden and stroked it lovingly.

“Flossie,” Wickenden repeated.

“It’s a long story,” Gillie said hurriedly. “But he always calls it Flossie. What happened, then, Danny?”

Danny shrugged. “Ran off, didn’t they? But I saw where they were looking and it was down there at the cellar steps, which is why I’ve been sitting here with Flossie ever since. I never expected you to appear this way, Miss Gillie! Where’s your aunt? And Mr. Bernard?”

As if on cue, the front door knocker sounded, closely followed by the scrape of a key in the lock.

“I suspect that’s them,” Gillie said ruefully. “Danny, run up and tell them I’m in my room but will come to the parlor directly. I don’t want Aunt Margaret to see me in this state or she’ll expire of palpitations or something even worse. I’ll wait here until the hall is clear.”

As Danny obediently trudged back up the stairs with a last warning glower over his shoulder at Wickenden, Gillie removed the baron’s coat from her shoulders and handed it to him.

“Thank you for this as well as everything else. You’ll be more comfortable leaving by the front door once my aunt and Bernard are upstairs.”

He smiled faintly, taking the coat from her. “My dear Miss Muir, I cannot be seen leaving your house when you’re supposed to have been here alone without your aunt or brother all this time. I’ll go back along the tunnel.”

“Just to try and win your wager?” she couldn’t help mocking. Even though he’d had more than one kiss on advance already.

He took her hand and kissed it gallantly. And then, being the wicked baron, he turned it and pressed another warmer kiss on the inside of her wrist, just over her galloping pulse. “I like to win. Good night, Miss Muir.”

“Good night,” she said faintly when he dropped her hand. Then she watched him stride off across the cellar chamber and vanish into the darkness of the tunnel, the glow of his lantern swinging with his arm.

☆

LORD WICKENDEN MANAGED to reenter the castle by the same side door he’d left by, and to change into fresh clothes with the aid of his

trusty valet who, however, expressed dire misgivings about the speed of the operation. Ignoring him, as he frequently did, Wickenden went downstairs in time for the tail-end of the ball.

Lady Serena abandoned her partner with unseemly haste as soon as she caught sight of him. He headed her off by nodding reassuringly. He was more interested in seeing who was not present, for he doubted Gillie's abduction had been spur-of-the-moment opportunism.

"Everything well, old chap?" Braithwaite asked, coming up behind him as he quartered the ballroom.

"Of course."

"My mother does this every year," Braithwaite observed. "I've wriggled out of it the last couple of years, but I might be more cooperative in the future. You should come again, if you can bear it."

"Most of my country time is spent on my own estates," Wickenden said abruptly, "but thanks."

Braithwaite leaned back against the nearby pillar and smiled slyly. "Unprecedented waltzing with provincial beauties. Wicked, old chap. I never thought you'd go so far in your apology."

"Apology?" Wickenden drawled. "My dear Braithwaite, can't you see I'm at the lady's feet?"

Close by, since he hadn't troubled to lower his voice, Kate Crowmore turned her head toward him. Wickenden smiled angelically and strolled away.

Chapter Six

THURSDAY, THE DAY after the ball, was not a card party evening, so Gillie felt entitled to be a little lazy. Having played down her early departure from the ball so as not to worry her aunt, she did, after much thought, decide to take Bernard into her confidence.

She discovered him in the dining room eating breakfast – a rare enough occurrence to make her stop dead in the doorway. “Who are you, and what have you done with my brother?”

Bernard grinned good-naturedly. “Couldn’t sleep,” he admitted.

Gillie walked over to the table and poured herself a cup of coffee. Bernard had heaped ham and toast on to his plate but didn’t appear to have eaten any of it. As she sat down and buttered a slice a toast, his eyes glazed over and he stared off into space, a rapt expression on his face that she couldn’t recall ever seeing before.

“You should eat,” Gillie observed.

“I’m not hungry,” Bernard replied, though at least his eyes came back into focus on her. “I can’t stop thinking about her.”

“Who?” Gillie asked, bewildered.

“A lady I met last night,” Bernard said, just a little sheepishly. “She is perfect. Immeasurably above me, and yet she danced with me.”

“It was a ball,” Gillie murmured.

“I’ve never seen such beauty, such playfulness, such...I can’t find the words.”

Gillie, who had the sisterly urge to laugh at her brother in love with—or at least entranced by—a lady for the first time, swallowed her mirth and asked, “Who is this beauty?”

“Catherine,” Bernard said reverently.

“Catherine Winslow?” Gillie said in surprise, hardly recognizing their neighbor’s daughter in Bernard’s euphoric description.

“Of course not!” Bernard exclaimed, clearly affronted. “She’s a child! An annoying one, too,” he added with a frown of memory.

“Not anymore,” Gillie argued. “She must be seventeen years old and she was definitely at the ball for we were in the same set together. Which Catherine then?”

“Lady Crowmore,” Bernard said in awed tones.

Gillie, with a flash of memory from last night, couldn’t prevent her dismay. But at least she knew better than to show it. “She is certainly very beautiful and very fashionable,” she allowed. “Though a little

older than the females I imagined would catch your eye."

"She dazzles me," Bernard said simply.

"Well, I wouldn't be too obvious about it," Gillie said uneasily. Thank God the castle guests would be gone soon, with their hosts. Including Lord Wickenden, but she wouldn't think about that. "People can be unkind. Now, would you please stop daydreaming and listen to me? I had a different kind of adventure last night that you need to be aware of."

As she told him all that occurred after she'd gone outside with Lady Serena, leaving out the intimate and distinctly scandalous passages with Lord Wickenden, Bernard's jaw dropped quite gratifyingly. He even sat up straight and stared at her until she finished with everyone's arrival home.

"*Wickenden* did that?" Bernard said, clearly clinging to the part of the story that had made the most impression upon him. "Well, I heard he spars with Gentleman Jackson himself. And they say he can kill his man with swords or pistols, so I suppose it's not as amazing as all that. Except that he troubled. Especially after you barred him from the house!"

"I apologized for that," she said as calmly as she could. "As indeed did he for the misunderstanding."

Bernard frowned at her, clearly deep in thought. "Tell you what I think, Gillie?" he said at last. "I think he likes you."

In spite of herself, a flush rose to her cheeks. "Hardly."

"He danced with you at the ball—apparently he never dances—and rescued you from those villains. Seems to me, if you just play your cards right, he might be the answer to all our prayers."

"Oh don't be so horrid and mercenary," she exclaimed, her cheeks burning with a distress she was at a loss to account for. "I'll not deny he was most kind last night, but he would no more consider offering for me than for Mattie! He's just bored in Blackhaven."

"Well, I did hear he'd only come here because his friends bundled him out of London after his last duel. If his man dies, he'll have to go abroad for a while. Though where, I don't know, with Europe at war. There's America, I suppose, only aren't we still officially at war with them too? India, then..."

"Bernard, keep to the point," she interrupted with severity. "Which is that these men who tried to abduct me are dangerous and looking for something. It strikes me they might go after you or Aunt Margaret, too. Or any of the servants. Danny can take care of himself, of course, but what of Charles and Mattie? And Dulcie!"

"Dulcie never leaves the house, so she's fine," Bernie said, scratching his head. "This doesn't make any sense."

"No, it doesn't, but I'm going to tell Charles and Mattie not to go

out alone for the time being. Nor you, Bernie. Take Danny with you.”

She could tell that he wasn’t convinced but at that moment, Charles appeared, with the news that a gentleman had called and was in the parlor with Miss Muir. Gillie and Bernard exchanged glances of sudden horror. The men had come here last night, failing to get passed the redoubtable Danny, but the easygoing Charles could have let any plausible villain in.

As one, Gillie and Bernard bolted from the dining room, rushed across the hall and upstairs to the parlor.

They arrived together, all but exploding into the room, breathless and no doubt wild-eyed. Aunt Margaret sat in her usual chair, her needlework in her lap, peering over the top of her spectacles at them with an expression of mild surprise.

Opposite her, sat Lord Wickenden.

He rose to his feet, bowing slightly from the waist. As groomed and elegant as ever, he bore little trace of the man who’d knocked two brutes unconscious, clambered over rocks in his shirt sleeves, and kissed her so...well, like *that*.

Bernard made a small, inarticulate noise in his throat and bowed nervously in return.

“Gillie,” Aunt Margaret uttered in tones of despair. “Did Charles not tell you his lordship was here?”

Self-consciously, Gillie touched her roughly pinned hair. Her hand itched to smooth the dull, everyday gown, but she forced it to be still. This gown’s appearance was well beyond a mere brush to improve. So, she simply walked forward and civilly held out her hand to Lord Wickenden.

“How do you do?” she murmured.

He took her hand, and she couldn’t help the way her pulse raced under his cool fingers. Even though there was no warmth in his equally cool eyes.

“That’s what I came to ask you,” he murmured. “I heard from Lady Serena that you’d been taken ill.”

“Did you?” she said wryly.

A spark of humor lit his eyes and she realized with relief the part he was playing for the benefit of her aunt and brother.

“I told Bernard,” she murmured. “For his own safety.”

Bernard all but shoved her aside in order to shake hands enthusiastically with the baron. “*Most* grateful for what you did last night,” he said earnestly. “Forever in your debt.”

“Nonsense,” Wickenden said briskly, retrieving his hand. “But I think you do need to take precautions to keep your sister and your household safe.”

“Absolutely.” Bernard nodded sagely.

"I've taken the liberty of asking Lord Braithwaite's people to find out who these men were. They'd vanished from the beach by the time I got back there."

"How did you get back?" Gillie demanded. "Was the tide not too far in to get round?"

"I climbed up the path from Black Cove and walked up the road. I don't suppose your smuggler is talking yet?"

"He's fevered," Gillie said. "But you're right. I'm sure Jack can shed some light on this. Do sit down."

As she turned to the sofa, Bernard hissed in her ear, "You told him about *Jack*?"

"He *saw* Jack. He isn't stupid."

"Thank you," Wickenden murmured in tones of amusement. "Or deaf."

Fortunately, Mattie brought the tea tray in then. Bernard spent a few minutes trying to talk sport with Wickenden, until the baron said casually, "There will be a few of us at the long field for curricule racing this afternoon. If you like sport, come and watch."

Bernard flushed with pleasure. "Truly, sir?"

"Truly," Wickenden said, turning to make civil conversation about the weather with Aunt Margaret.

GILLIE WAS GLAD of the invitation, since it pleased Bernard so much and might, besides deflect him from the charms of Lady Crowmore. She wondered if her brother knew of the rumored connection between the lady and the wicked baron. In fact, now that she thought of it herself, she couldn't help wondering if Lady Crowmore's presence at the castle hadn't been the main attraction for Wickenden.

Hastily, she shook off such thoughts of matters which were not and never would be any of her business. Instead, remembering the paper she'd picked up in the tunnel, she rose with a murmured excuse and went to fetch it from her bedchamber. By the time she returned, Wickenden was already taking his leave of her aunt.

"Oh, you're going," Gillie said from the doorway, forgetting to hide her disappointment. "I meant to show you this."

"Walk with me to the front door," he recommended. "What is *this*?"

"It's the paper we found in the tunnel last night. Look, there's blood on it."

He halted at the top of the stairs and took it from her, eyeing the bloodstains with disfavor. "Your smuggler's?"

"I don't think anyone else was bleeding. I think Jack must have dropped it there. It doesn't seem to make any sense in English or in French, though these words might be names, do you think?"

“English names,” Wickenden said thoughtfully. “In code.”

“They’re probably his customers,” Gillie said.

“Possibly.”

Gillie stood on tiptoe to peer over his arm. His gaze lifted from the paper to her face and remained there, unblinking, reminding her how close to him she stood. Her breath seemed to be trapped. For an instant, the walls, the stairs, even the bloodstained paper all faded as if there was only him in the world.

Then he dragged his gaze free and began to walk down the stairs. “Would you know any of these names?” he asked calmly. “If they are indeed customers.”

She shook her head. “I might, but we don’t really talk about such things. I suppose you could go round the neighborhood tasting everyone’s brandy.”

“I’ll bear it in mind for the long winter months,” he said sardonically. “May I keep this?”

“Of course.”

“And if you get any sense out of your smuggler, send me word through your brother.”

“You are in a hurry,” she observed as he scooped his hat off the table in the hall and strode on toward the door, where he paused. He would expect, she thought, a servant to open it for him.

He glanced back over his shoulder, a faint smile hovering on his lips. “I’m being good. I just can’t keep it up for very long.” He opened the door and was gone.

And for some reason she was smiling at the closed door, her spirits soaring without permission.

*

GILLIE WAS TAKING her turn nursing Jack, to give poor Dulcie a rest, when Bernard stuck his head in the door to say he was off to see the curricule racing in the long field up by the castle.

“Take Danny with you – discreetly,” she ordered. “And listen. On your way back, I think you should call on Jack’s wife, make sure all is well with her.”

Bernard frowned, very briefly distracted from his pride in being invited anywhere by the wicked baron. “You think these thugs might be looking for Jack?”

“Or just for anyone who knows the tunnel. They’re strangers, so they’re unlikely to know who does and doesn’t know such things. They’d have to pursue only those they’d be sure could tell them.”

“Well, after their botched work last night, they’d flee the country if they’d any sense,” Bernard said cheerfully. “But just in case they’re

stupid, I'll make sure Charles keeps the door locked and doesn't let in any strangers."

During the afternoon, Jack's fever finally broke and Dulcie, brought in for her opinion, pronounced that he would live. Gillie had her doubts, for the man still seemed weak and listless, and barely opened his eyes, but taking her old nurse at her word, she left the bedchamber and went to take tea with her aunt as usual.

When Aunt Margaret's friends, the Misses Derwent joined them, as they often did, it came to Gillie that few other ladies called any more. The officers' wives and local ladies including the squire's wife and the vicar's daughter had used to call quite regularly. Looking back, she couldn't quite recall exactly when the change had begun, but surely it had been after her father died. If she'd thought of it at all, she'd put it down to respect for her mourning, but it was six months now since he'd died.

Maybe the countess was right. Maybe no one regarded her as respectable anymore. It was stupid and unfair but it could well be true. In which case, at least she'd win Lord Wickenden's wager, for her plight would be beyond the scope of his polite and respectful favor to fix.

But there was no real reason to care for that kind of reputation. She very much doubted she'd ever want to marry anyone who was actually prepared to marry her.

At least Major Randolph arrived a few minutes later to cheer her up. "How are you?" he asked Gillie after greeting the older ladies in his polite manner. "I heard you left the ball early last night."

"Yes, it was quite annoying," Gillie said lightly. "I felt unwell and had to come home – which unfortunately spoiled my aunt's evening too – and Bernard's, although to be truthful, he hadn't wanted to come in the first place."

"He seemed happy enough by the end," Randolph observed. "Most taken with one of the Countess's London guests."

"So I believe! Do you know her?"

Randolph shook his head. "She has a somewhat scandalous reputation."

Gillie wrinkled her nose. "But because she is married, she is received everywhere."

"That and I expect she retains just enough discretion. But I do not wish to talk about her. I was hoping nothing that occurred at the ball upset you enough to force you to leave. I did see Grantham quarrel with you."

She waved that to one side. "I suppose I was indiscreet to make such a fuss," she said contritely. "I should apologize to him for that if for nothing else."

“Well, that must be between you and Grantham. So long as it was not your next dancing partner who drove you from the ball.”

Although she tried to remain calm, she couldn't prevent the flush seeping into her face. “Lord Wickenden? Of course not. He is most entertaining.”

“He has chosen to single you out a couple of times now. I just want you to know that if you and Bernard need a friend, I am here.”

“Thank you,” she said. “We have always regarded you so.”

All the same, she was glad of the opportunity to break off the conversation to rise and fetch the tea poured by her aunt. Her hackles rose at the idea he imagined she needed friends to stand with her against Lord Wickenden. Besides, if Randolph had noticed the baron's attentions, so had the rest of the town.

Randolph had only just departed when Mattie appeared in the room with a quick curtsey and sidled up to Gillie. “Miss, Jack's wife is here, with all four of her bairns. Should I take them up to Jack?”

So much for keeping the smuggler's presence from the rest of the household. Gillie hesitated, then rose to her feet. “Let me speak to them first. Excuse me,” she added civilly to her guests who barely noticed her departure.

Mrs. Jack was discovered in the kitchen, drinking tea at the table with Cook, who was patting her shoulder in a sympathetic kind of way. Four children of varying sizes had piled on to the two other wooden chairs. Everyone jumped to their feet as Gillie swept in.

“Forgive me coming here, Miss Gillie. I know you've been looking after my Jack and I've been so grateful. I would never add more trouble to you, only I need to speak to Jack—”

“Well, of course you must speak to Jack. Did Dulcie tell you his fever is broken and she believes he will mend now?”

“No, Miss, I haven't seen Dulcie.”

“Her house's been ransacked,” Cook interrupted. “Scared the life out of her. Came home from the harbor with the children and found the place turned upside down.”

“But that's terrible!” Gillie exclaimed.

“I can fix it. Mostly,” Mrs. Jack said anxiously. “But I need to ask my husband if—if we should—if he...”

“Of course you must,” Gillie said. “But I think you must stay here until he's well again.”

Mrs. Jack's mouth fell open. “Stay here? Miss, there's five of us and you've already got Jack!”

“I know, but we do have space since the household has shrunk since my father died. I've already told the others, none of you should go out alone.”

“Oh no,” Mrs. Jack uttered, “What's my Jack got into now?”

"Until we know, you'd better pretend we've employed you as an extra housemaid or something."

"Housemaid? I've never been in service in my life!"

"It doesn't matter," Gillie assured her. "You won't actually have to do anything – except maybe look after Jack."

"We can't all stay here for nothing, Miss."

"Well we can talk about that. The important thing is you don't go home just now. Come, Mattie will take you to Jack and help you make up rooms for yourself and the children."

*

IF DANNY HADN'T been keeping watch on Bernard, Gillie would have worried herself sick. As it was, by the time they returned after dark, she'd resorted to pacing the parlor and looking out of the window every few minutes for a glimpse of them. However, they rolled home happy and unharmed – it seemed that, as was often with the way with gentlemen-only gatherings of this nature, several had ended up in the tavern.

Bernard had had a whale of a time. Lord Braithwaite's London friends had been both tolerant and friendly, and Lord Wickenden was pronounced to be a great gun and not at all full of himself as everyone said.

"I'll tell you what, though," Bernard confided. "The amounts of money those fellows drop on wagers would make your eyes pop."

"Oh dear, you didn't, did you?" she said, discovering a new anxiety.

"Lord, no, I kept out of it. Mostly. Here, have you quarreled with Kit Grantham?"

"No." She frowned, suddenly remembering the abortive waltz and proposal which had become lost in the far more exciting events with Lord Wickenden. "That is, we had a disagreement at the ball, but I'm not bearing a grudge if he isn't."

"Well, I think he might be. I bumped into him in the George, told him to come tomorrow evening, but he said he wouldn't be welcome."

"He's being silly," Gillie said flatly. "And he was silly last night, too. Oh, Bernie, Jack's family is here because their house was ransacked, so if you come across children in odd places, that's who they are."

*

BY THE FOLLOWING morning, Smuggler Jack was sitting up in bed. Although still as weak as a kitten, he'd eaten some gruel fed to him by

his wife and been well-hugged by his lively children. So by the time Gillie visited him, he did at least look more like the Jack she knew.

"So sorry for all this trouble, Miss Gillie," Jack said. "Never entered my head they'd leave me here."

"I suppose they thought we'd fetch you a doctor. Um...I need to talk to you, Jack."

Jack's wife immediately herded the children, who looked mutinous but were clearly still too in awe of Gillie to disobey, out of the room, and Gillie sat on the end of the bed.

"I need to talk to you, too," Jack said at once. "I need my clothes."

"Oh don't worry, you shall have them back," Gillie said in amusement. "We only took them away to wash and mend. You bled a lot."

Jack shifted uncomfortably. "Yes, but there were things in the pockets I need. You wouldn't have thrown anything out, would you, however useless it might seem to you?"

"No, no," Gillie soothed. "There's a little pile of your things on the dresser." She rose to fetch it, but he stayed her with three words.

"It's not there."

"What isn't?"

"A letter. Part of a letter. A folded piece of paper."

Gillie sat down again very slowly, and raised her eyes to his pale, anxious face. "That is yours? It has writing on it that doesn't make sense?"

He nodded, although he looked, if anything, even more anxious, rather than relieved as he should have been at his precious letter being found.

"It's safe," she assured him. "A friend of mine has it."

He closed his eyes. He might have been in pain from his wound, but it looked to Gillie more like mental anguish.

Her breath caught. "That's what they were looking for, the men who broke into your house and tried to abduct me to find the cellar... Why?"

"It's got their names on it. Traitors who've been carrying more than contraband—information, prisoners, information, spies—across the Channel."

Gillie's eyes widened. "Then they're not rival smugglers?"

"Part of our...colleagues in the south. I took money from our government to find out who they are. Their names are in that letter, along with those higher up French agents who were discovered by *our* agent in France. I was to give it to my contact back here, but I think the traitors knew. No one saw who attacked us, but it was from the sea. We assumed excise men or soldiers, but they never followed us ashore. Our ship was damaged and we were forced to land at

Braithwaite Cove, even with his lordship in residence.”

“Ah!” Gillie exclaimed. “That could be why they thought the tunnel entrance was there rather than the Black Cove.”

“Probably. They must have thought I was dead, and by time someone told them my information was written down, we must already have been round at the Black Cove and heading through the tunnels. So, Miss Gillie, who did you give that letter to?”

“A friend,” she said. “But you may trust him. And I’ll get it back.”

Even as she said the words, she wondered if they were true. If Lord Wickenden didn’t wish to return the document, she would need to go to a lot of creative trouble to retrieve it. As for trust...

Her instinct to trust him had always been strong, but the very first night they’d met he’d shown her how misplaced that trust was. They didn’t call him the wicked baron for nothing. And yet, in his own way, he’d been kind to her, far beyond what was necessary from either civility or silly wagers, even before he’d rescued her from abduction.

She frowned. “Can you read, Jack? Do you know what the document said?”

“Reading wouldn’t have helped me. It’s in code.”

“So you don’t need to worry about anyone else reading it either.”

“I suppose not,” he allowed reluctantly. “But I do need to get it to where it’s meant to be.”

“Where is that?” Gillie asked. “Who are you working for in this matter?”

Jack hesitated, then said reluctantly, “Colonel Fredericks.”

*

GILLIE WAITED IMPATIENTLY for Lord Wickenden to call. Somehow, she was sure he would, in pursuit of his wager, if nothing else, and she really needed to get Jack’s document back from him.

At least, she told herself that was the reason. Fortunately, she was kept busy arranging things for the evening’s card party, but she strained her ears for any knock on the door, and her heart fluttered at every footfall. It was never him.

In the end, it was quite a rush to change for the party. Even so, as she dragged her familiar grey evening gown from the wardrobe, she paused and eyed it with disfavor. There didn’t seem much point in wearing mourning still when they were holding parties. Besides, she’d worn the green gown to the castle ball...poor green gown.

On impulse, she shoved the dull grey gown back inside and found her old evening gown of pale amber silk. It was more than three years old, so it was hardly the height of fashion either, but at least it was not *drab*. She hurried into it, avoiding all thoughts of exactly why she

didn't wish to be drab.

"Oh, that looks much better," Aunt Margaret approved, bustling in to help with her hair and fastenings. "I'm sure your father will understand. If you still wear the black gloves."

Obediently, Gillie reached for the black gloves.

"Oh, there was a note from Lady Serena," Aunt Margaret remembered, placing pins with admirable accuracy. "Now, where did I put it?"

"What did it say?" Gillie asked, resigned to never reading it.

"Inviting you—well, inviting all of us, but since she stated distinctly that the party would be chaperoned, I shall probably decline—to an expedition to the ruins of Blackhaven Abbey. Tomorrow, I believe."

Gillie's heart leapt at the chance, but tomorrow seemed too long to wait.

Although the card parties had become part of normal life for her, she was conscious that evening of a twinge of excitement, a nervous hope that Lord Wickenden would come tonight. And it didn't matter how much she chastised or even laughed at herself, she couldn't shake off the anticipation.

Quite early, a couple of Lord Braithwaite's London guests—men Bernard had made friends with—strolled in, but neither the earl nor Wickenden were with them. Presumably, Lady Braithwaite had instructed her son and Wickenden must have stayed away with him. Which made her wonder if the countess had sanctioned Serena's invitation to the Abbey expedition tomorrow.

She refused to worry about that, although disappointment curled around her stomach. She told herself she needed to see Wickenden for Jack's sake and resolved to find a moment to speak with him on the subject tomorrow. Providing he came to the abbey. For this evening, she refused to pine for him and busied herself welcoming guests and being as perfect a hostess as she could manage.

She was just shooing Jack's children back into the kitchen—they were crouched by the door, half hidden, watching guests arrive—when a novelty occurred. A lady stepped through the front door into the hall.

Gillie let the kitchen door swing back, hiding the children, and hurried across to meet the newcomer.

Escorted by a gentleman in a well-fitting black coat and pantaloons, she wore an evening gown of black silk beneath a matching pelisse. She must have been a little past thirty, and at the height of her haughty beauty. Although all the black she wore seemed somehow to shout respectability, Gillie had never seen her or her companion before. And recent events had made her careful.

“Madam,” she said pleasantly, “you are welcome. May I have your card of invitation?”

The woman raised her eyebrows, looking down her long, slender nose at Gillie before turning to her companion, who bowed.

“Mademoiselle,” he said. “I regret we have no invitation. We have only just arrived. Our luggage is waiting to be brought in.”

“Luggage?” Gillie repeated blankly. “Are you quite sure you have the correct house, sir?”

“You are Miss Gillyflower Muir?” He spoke English well, but in a distinctly foreign accent that sounded French to Gillie.

“Yes...”

“You are Captain Muir’s daughter?”

“Yes, I am, but—”

With an apologetic smile, the gentleman interrupted her floundering. “This is Madame Muir.”

Gillie picked up her dropping jaw with a monumental effort.

“Formerly Dona Isabella Maria Margarita de Vasquilez y Morena,” the gentleman pronounced. “Your late father’s widow.”

Chapter Seven

WHILE GILLIE STOOD in shock, the Spanish lady swept past her across the hall to the salon. She halted outside the doorway, gazing in.

"We have taken you by surprise," the Frenchman said kindly. "But you should have received a letter..."

"It was written in Spanish," she said, understanding at last. "I couldn't read it and pursued it no further. I assumed it was a letter of condolence... But this makes no sense. How can my father have a widow?"

"They married in Spain."

"But he never told us," Gillie protested. "*Nobody* told us!"

"I understand he was waiting until he could tell you in person, but alas that was never to be. My condolences to you and your brother."

Gillie dragged her gaze from her step-mother's rigid back to the Frenchman's face. "I'm sorry. If you told me who you are, I'm afraid I've forgotten."

"Georges de Garnache, Mademoiselle. I am, sadly, an exile from my native France since the revolution, along with my brother, the Comte de Garnache. I also have the honor to be Madame Muir's cousin. I escorted her from Spain."

"I see. Um...why is she here?"

The woman spun around, turning her back on the apparently distasteful scene in the salon. Her dark eyes spat with anger. A stream of furious Spanish issued from her mouth.

M. de Garnache made a placating gesture with his hands and turned back to Gillie. "Dona Isabella is disappointed that you have left off mourning so soon," he said apologetically.

Another tirade interrupted him and he sighed. "Dona Isabella is further disappointed that you are treating—that you seem to be treating—your father's house like some den of iniquity."

"It's a few friends playing cards," Gillie said tartly, roused at last from her torpor. "I trust Dona Isabella will give me leave to tell her that whoever is in my home or why is not her concern."

A flash of triumph in the other woman's eyes gave her an instant's warning of the blow to come.

"But, Mademoiselle, it is very much her concern," M. de Garnache said gently. "For this house is Dona Isabella's. Captain Muir left it to her and she intends to live in it. Dona Isabella is, in fact, *enceinte* and

intends to bring her child up here in England.”

For an instant, the world reeled, almost as if it had somehow come off its axis and she was falling away into darkness. Then, abruptly, a hand took hers, cool, firm, and steadying. She looked blankly up into the face of Lord Wickenden.

“Miss Muir is not well,” he said abruptly. “I’m afraid you must excuse her.”

Isabella’s mouth opened, clearly with more to say, but the Frenchman spoke before her.

“I’m sorry, our news has shocked you,” he said to Gillie. “It is not surprising. Also, since you have guests, we shall put up tonight at the Blackhaven Hotel. By your leave, we will call upon you again tomorrow afternoon. It would, perhaps, be helpful if Mr. Bernard Muir were also present.”

“Along with several solicitors,” Wickenden murmured as the pair departed, heads held high as if either oblivious or careless of what they’d just done and were about to do. “Go upstairs,” he advised. “I’ll send your aunt to you.”

But as he made to withdraw his hand, she clung to it as if to her only comfort. “Don’t. Please don’t leave me.”

Even in her stunned state, she was aware of the arrested expression in his eyes. Then, almost deliberately, he smiled. “Propriety, my dear Gillyflower,” he mocked. “You are forgetting propriety.”

“No,” she said. “It doesn’t matter now. The house isn’t ours. We have nothing.”

“According to whom?” Wickenden said robustly. “Two people whom you don’t know from Adam and Eve. Go. I’ll send your aunt to you – or your brother, if you prefer—and we’ll talk more when you come back down.”

She swallowed, dragging herself back to reality with a mighty effort. Hastily, she released Wickenden’s hand.

“I don’t need anyone. I’ll be back down in five minutes. Don’t tell...”

As it turned out, five minutes was all she needed to gather herself into at least an outward semblance of calm. The more she thought about it, the more she realized the unlikelihood of her father being able to marry in total secrecy, with none of his family or regimental friends being aware of it. Surely he hadn’t had enough time in Spain to marry, let alone father a child. No, the Spanish woman and her French “cousin” were flim-flam merchants of the worst order.

Deliberately, she stopped her restless pacing and took several deep breaths. She would write to Mr. Worthing, her father’s solicitor, first thing tomorrow and invite him to the meeting with her so called step mother. Very little got past Mr. Worthing’s sharp, if elderly, eyes. He’d

soon send them packing to wherever they'd come from, whether that really was Spain or London's east end.

Satisfied, she left her bedchamber once more and returned to the gaming salons. She saw at once that Wickenden was playing hazard at Bernard's table, a half glass of brandy at his elbow. He didn't appear to register her presence, and yet she knew he'd seen her. She made no effort to go to him, nor he to her. Under his tutelage, it seemed she was learning discretion.

Tonight, there was no game of snap in the alcove, merely a hastily exchanged few words as supper was served. They met as if by accident at the doorway, and Wickenden immediately stepped to one side, where she joined him.

"Jack is awake," she murmured. "His message is in code, for Colonel Fredericks. You need to either take it to him or give me it back so that I can."

He nodded once, without obvious interest. "Then your abductors were traitors?"

"Apparently so. They obviously know about the document and want it, because they seem to have ransacked Jack's house, too."

"Didn't you say he had family? Are they hurt?"

She shook her head. "They're here for now."

"And the other matter?"

"You're right," she said. "I don't believe them. I'll send for our solicitor."

"Good idea." He smiled and suddenly all attention was only on her. It was almost giddy. "You can tell me how it goes on our expedition of pleasure tomorrow."

"You're going to the abbey, too?"

"Yes, but you shan't need a dragon. We'll be fiercely chaperoned by Lady Frances and Lady Crowmore."

Gillie's heart gave an unpleasant little jolt, but she merely smiled, gave a slight curtsy, and passed on her way.

*

THE MORNING PROVED to be showery. Gillie half hoped and half feared for the expedition to be put off. Somehow, the presence of Lady Crowmore spoiled the pleasure for her, which was ridiculous when she'd never even met the woman. A man of Wickenden's nature was bound to have a past. She didn't care about it. Much. But if she was totally honest with herself, she feared it wasn't past at all. She'd caught glimpses of Lady Crowmore watching him, and although Gillie was not greatly experienced in matters of love, she very much doubted they were the looks of a mere friend.

She didn't even know why it mattered. Wickenden was merely passing the time with Gillie, no doubt enjoying the game of discreet flirting along with the danger of secret, passionate kisses. There would never be any more for her, and she knew it would hurt her when he left Blackhaven.

In the meantime, she had more important things to worry about. Bernard and Aunt Margaret were, naturally, both flabbergasted when she told them about the visit of Captain Muir's supposed widow. They agreed with her that it was impossible, and both were with her when Mr. Worthing turned up, closely followed by a Mr. Featherstone, Lord Braithwaite's man of business from London.

"His lordship asked me to call and help in any way I can," Mr. Featherstone explained, with a quick glance at Mr. Worthing. "I have no wish to step on your toes, sir, but I have come across such cases before."

Mr. Worthing, with no sign of professional jealousy, welcomed a second pair of experienced eyes, and Gillie proposed they meet the imposters in the dining room, where they could sit around a table and keep things businesslike.

"Mrs. Muir" and her cousin were announced promptly at eleven o'clock. Although Isabella was still rigid with disapproval that bordered on contempt, Gillie politely introduced her aunt and brother, neither of whom offered to shake hands, and the solicitors. Then she sent for tea and invited everyone to sit around the dining room table.

Isabella spoke first, directing a torrent of stiff Spanish at Bernard, who looked totally blank.

M. de Garnache hastily translated. "My cousin proposes to come immediately to the point," he said, extracting a sheaf of papers from his leather satchel and setting them in front of Isabella. She pushed them across the table to Bernard. "The marriage license," M. de Garnache explained. "And the certificate of the marriage between your father and Madame Muir. Also a copy of his will in which he names Madame Muir as his heir to this house and all his possessions, including his income from Blackfield Farm, for her lifetime, after which everything will pass to his eldest son, Bernard."

Gillie was unpleasantly surprised by the documents, but she reminded herself that they could easily be forgeries. She hoped so, for all things being equal, Bernard couldn't hope to inherit for the next twenty or thirty years at least.

Bernard rifled through the documents, frowning, before passing them to Mr. Worthing without a word.

The Spanish woman spoke again, with an unmistakable curl to her lip. She still sounded angry.

"Madame Muir wishes to express her outrage at your disrespect for

her husband,” M. de Garnache said smoothly. “To be holding parties within a year of his death is shocking enough, but to have turned his home into a gaming hell is beyond what she is prepared to tolerate. She therefore insists that you vacate this house within the week, after which time, she will remain in sole possession until her death.”

Bernard released an exclamation only half under his breath. Gillie, flushed with anger, caught Isabella’s hard gaze and laughed in her face. “In your dreams,” she said deliberately. “And only there.”

Unexpectedly, there was a flash of something very like surprise in Isabella’s eyes, which had widened at Gillie’s retort. It might have been reaction to the tone of her voice, but Gillie didn’t think so. She thought Isabella understood far more English than she was letting on. She was just letting her “cousin” do the dirty work.

Mr. Worthing looked up over the documents and regarded Isabella over his spectacles. “Firstly, Madame, you have no say, legal or otherwise, in how my clients conduct their lives. Secondly, there is no question of you gaining admittance to this house in anything like a week. All these documents must be verified, and considering the distances involved and the state of war which exists in Europe, this will not happen within a month.” He tidied the papers and passed them to Mr. Featherstone. “In the circumstances, I would advise you to make whatever alternative living arrangements you wish. You may leave your address with my office and we shall contact you as soon as our business is complete.”

From Isabella’s stunned expression, Gillie was sure she caught the gist of that. Nevertheless, she waited until M. de Garnache had translated the whole before she rose to her feet. Two angry red spots of color had appeared on her cheeks.

Mr. Worthing rose and bowed. “Good day, Madame. Monsieur.”

Bernard and Mr. Featherstone also rose politely. M. de Garnache stumbled slightly as he stood. Gillie remained exactly where she was, watching Isabella as impassively as she knew how. Inside, she was hugging the unexpectedly redoubtable Mr. Worthing and cheering like a hoyden.

“This is a disgrace!” M. de Garnache blustered. “The good captain would turn in his grave to see his poor pregnant wife treated in such a way!”

“Then it is a pity,” Mr. Featherstone observed, walking across to open the dining room door, “that the good captain did not see fit to tell his family or anyone else about his marriage. The problem would not then exist.”

Isabella swept out of the room without a word. Her “cousin” hesitated, as though he wished to stay and fight the issue, but the sight of Bernard and Mr. Worthing advancing to stand with Mr.

Featherstone, clearly decided him against it. He merely flared his nostrils and stalked from the room.

Mr. Featherstone closed the door. Bernard grinned, wringing the hands of both solicitors. "Excellently well done, gentlemen!" he enthused. "I applaud you!"

"You were magnificent," Gillie agreed, leaping up at last with sheer relief. "The insolence of that woman! Under no possibilities could my father ever have married such a creature!"

A quick glance out of the window showed her Isabella walking out of the gate, one arm protectively over her belly. She really was with child, Gillie thought uneasily. That part, at least, was true.

"And that slimy Frenchman," Bernard said, "daring to tell *us* what my father might have wished or thought! I'll tell you this much, he'd never have allowed anyone to turn us out of our home and if that woman believes otherwise, she never even *met* my father."

"That may all be true," Mr. Worthing said heavily. "On the other hand, I have to tell that at first glance, the documents seem genuine."

Gillie jerked back round to face them. "*What?* Even the will?"

"Especially the will," Mr. Worthing said. "The signature looks very much like your father's. Which doesn't mean it *is* his, of course. It could just mean our friends did some very good research."

"The other documents look genuine too," Mr. Featherstone admitted, "but you cannot be ejected from your home until they are proven without doubt. Mr. Worthing has given you time, but not necessarily any more than that."

Bernard and Gillie both sank back into their chairs.

"Truly?" Gillie said. "You actually think their claims are true?"

"On the whole, no," Mr. Worthing said with a quick glance at his colleague. "But it is as well to be prepared for the worst. We shall begin investigations immediately."

"Kit!" Gillie said suddenly. "Kit Grantham was in Spain at the same time as my father! He would have known if my father had got married, and he is here in Blackhaven."

"An excellent place to start," Mr. Worthing approved. "Mr. Featherstone and I shall set in motion the dull, legal investigation while you speak to your friends." He took Gillie's hand and pressed it. "Keep your spirits up, my dear. We shall sort this out."

*

THERE WAS LITTLE time to prepare for the abbey expedition. Quite deliberately, Gillie had left off the grey mourning dress for the meeting with her supposed stepmother, and instead worn a colorful printed calico gown. Aunt Margaret, who seemed to pay more

attention to what she wore these days, approved it as just the thing for a spring expedition of pleasure, being bright and pretty and not too fine a material for the March winds liable to spring up.

Unfortunately, she had to wear it with her everyday pelisse and her best bonnet which, at least, vaguely matched the gown in color.

After a moment's hesitation, she wore the black kid gloves rather than the lighter pair.

She allowed herself only one glance in the mirror, for she'd never cared hugely for her appearance and was well aware she could never compete in dress with the Conway ladies and their wealthy guests. With a quick shrug, she left the bedchamber, calling for Bernard to hurry, for the carriage was waiting.

Bernard, of course, with the possibility of seeing his divine Catherine again, would not have missed the expedition for the world.

In fact, several carriages stood in a line from their front gate, all but blocking the street. Lady Serena waved from the first one, beckoning, and a footman stood by to open the door.

"Don't you feel like a princess?" Bernard murmured sardonically in Gillie's ear.

"Don't you?" she retorted and climbed into the carriage.

"We've room for both of you," Serena said gaily.

It was something of a shock to discover that the carriage's other occupant was none other than Lady Crowmore. Bernard, obviously, was delighted, although the lady herself looked bored. If she noticed his effusions, they amused her.

"So what happened this morning?" Serena demanded as the carriage bowled along the road through the town. "Did you send the insolent woman packing?"

"For now," Gillie said ruefully, "at least until her claims can be proven."

"I must say it doesn't sound very like Captain Muir to have done such a thing," Serena allowed.

"Men behave differently in war," Lady Crowmore pronounced. "But I can see why you would want to keep your darling little house. Is it truly run as a gaming house?"

"Why, would you like an invitation?" Gillie said before she could bite her tongue.

"I might," Lady Crowmore said, without apparent offence. "Like you, my dear, I don't always care to do the expected."

"They're just card parties," Bernard said anxiously. "There's no reason in the world why you shouldn't attend."

Except, of course, that Lady Braithwaite might eject her from the castle. Since that would not, on the whole, have upset Gillie, she kept her mouth shut.

"Do you have a roulette wheel?" Lady Crowmore inquired.

"Of course not," Gillie retorted.

"Maybe you should purchase one. They're very popular, I believe. And the house always wins."

"How long are you staying at Braithwaite Castle?" Gillie asked pleasantly.

Lady Crowmore laughed. "I believe most of us depart on Monday, giving her ladyship time to set things to right without her troublesome guests before she herself leaves for London the day after."

"It will seem quiet in Blackhaven," Gillie observed, her words mechanical as she realized how dull, how empty, her world would be again without Lord Wickenden's disturbing presence.

Lady Crowmore regarded her thoughtfully, as though looking for the barb in her remark. "It seems quiet in Blackhaven now."

"We brought easels and watercolors and things," Serena broke in hastily, "for those who wish to paint. Frances and Lady Crowmore have set up a competition among some of the ladies, and the gentlemen are to judge."

"Do you paint, Miss Muir?" Lady Crowmore inquired lazily.

"I daub," Gillie replied. "But no one older than seven is likely to recognize what it is."

Lady Crowmore actually smiled, a flicker of interest, perhaps even liking in her languid eyes. "Are you being modest or truthful?"

"Truthful," Bernard said with cheerful brotherly contempt.

"I enjoy it," Gillie confessed, "but I'm more known for enthusiasm than talent. I look forward to seeing your work, though."

"Oh I never *work* at it," Lady Crowmore said with a yawn. "I never work at anything."

"I expect you never need to," Bernard said.

"Of course I don't. I've never *needed* to do anything."

There didn't seem much to say to that, though it struck Gillie for the first time that Lady Crowmore was an unhappy person. It made her more interesting to Gillie. And presumably to Lord Wickenden... although perhaps he was the route of her sorrow?

"We are quite a cavalcade," Gillie observed to Serena as they left the town behind at last. "Have you brought all your guests?"

"Lord, no. One carriage is full of food and furniture! It's largely the younger people. Catherine Winslow is with us, too, and the vicar's wife for ultimate propriety. Braithwaite and Lord Wickenden are riding..."

Gillie missed the rest of the list through relief at discovering Wickenden's presence. It wasn't just that she wanted to tell him about the morning's meeting and discuss the traitor problem. His presence seemed to have become necessary to her comfort – which was bizarre

when he was so far from being a comfortable presence. Perhaps it was his excitement that she craved, a sop to the boredom of mourning and interminable card parties.

The picturesque ruins of Blackhaven Abbey stood on the top of a hill which stretched out into a large wood. It overlooked the rocky cliffs and the sea on one side and the rolling hills and farms on another. The abbey itself consisted now only of a few ruined walls in picturesque shapes, a fine arched window, a dramatic pillar stretching up toward the clouds, and a few large, fallen stones which Gillie had used to sit on to stare dreamily out to sea and imagine the wonder of the world beyond Blackhaven.

How odd, when her every concern now was to *stay* in Blackhaven... Or was it? In their present circumstances, there was simply nowhere else for Bernard and her to go. The tiny rental income from Black Farm was all they had since their father's death, apart from what they earned through the card parties. And the card parties would only work here among friends. If they really had to leave the house to Isabella, Gillie had no idea what they would do.

She and Bernard would both have to earn livings. Perhaps she could become governess to a travelling family and see the world.

"Gillie!" Lady Frances caught her almost as soon as she stepped out of the carriage. "What is this I hear about an unknown wicked stepmother?"

Gillie murmured a condensed version of recent events as she didn't particularly want to discuss it in front of everyone. Besides which, she'd just caught sight of Lord Wickenden with Lord Braithwaite and one of the other guests from the castle riding out of the woods on horseback. They'd clearly got here well ahead of the carriages and spent the time exploring.

For a time, everyone wandered around the ruins, and the ladies began to pick out which views they wished to paint. Gillie, who had too many other things on her mind to concentrate, picked an old favored spot from childhood. She could sit on a stone and gaze through the tumbled-down arch to the sea. One of the castle footmen came and placed an easel for her, offered her a folding chair, which she rejected with thanks.

Lady Frances, since she was organizing the event, rushed up to deliver some paper and brushes, and called to the footman to bring a cup of water. "Good luck," she murmured to Gillie.

"I would need more than luck," Gillie observed. "Much more – as you know!"

Frances laughed and skipped off toward Miss Winslow. "I wish you it anyway!"

"May I join you?"

Gillie turned quickly toward the speaker and discovered Lady Crowmore already instructing the footman to set up her chair and easel only a couple of feet from Gillie's place.

"Of course," she said civilly.

"Trust a native to find the best view," Lady Crowmore remarked as she settled herself in the chair and pinned a piece of paper to her easel.

"I don't think there's a poor one," Gillie said lightly.

If there was someone she could have chosen *not* to sit beside, it would have been Lady Crowmore. However, having chosen her position, she could hardly stand up now and move somewhere else. And in fact, for most of the painting time, it was easy to forget she was there. Both women painted in silence, particularly after Bernard attached himself to Lady Crowmore's elbow and tried to make admiring conversation about her painting. In no uncertain terms, Lady Crowmore sent him away. Gillie would have been relieved at no longer having to listen to her brother's embarrassing effusions, were it not for the expression of hurt she glimpsed on his face as he departed – like a devoted dog who'd been kicked.

"You think me cruel," Lady Crowmore observed.

"I would not presume to tell you so."

"Think of the alternative," Lady Crowmore drawled.

Briefly, Gillie met her gaze, then inclined her head and went on in silence daubing grey paint in the vague shape of the abbey arch.

Occasionally, other gentleman wandered by to admire and Gillie gathered that Lady Crowmore's piece was indeed excellent.

"I suppose your sister's is better," Lady Crowmore said to Lord Braithwaite.

"Serena's is a horrible muddle," Braithwaite replied brutally, "But Frances's is quite good."

"Better than mine?"

"I won't give my judgement until they're all completed," Braithwaite said with mock haughtiness, turning instead to Gillie's.

"Don't say a word," Gillie warned him. "I don't want my illusions spoiled."

Inevitably, Lord Wickenden strolled by, too. Gillie, agonizingly aware of his approach, had to force herself not to cover her painting with both arms. Especially when he halted and gazed at it. She wracked her brains to think of something witty to say, but words eluded her.

"I sense a wanderlust," he observed unexpectedly.

She spared him a quick, surprised glance over her shoulder. "Inevitable in a girl who has spent all her life in Blackhaven."

"Go to Spain," Lady Crowmore suggested. "And live in your would-

be stepmother's house."

Gillie couldn't help her breath of laughter at that. "I'll bear it in mind."

"Don't," Wickenden advised, moving on. "Nothing Kate says should be borne in mind for longer than it takes you to finish laughing."

"I shall just say the words *pot*, *kettle*, and *black*," Lady Crowmore drawled, "and leave Miss Muir to connect them."

From the corner of her eye, Gillie watched him examine Lady Crowmore's painting, exchange another teasing word, and move on, at which point she lowered her eyes back to her own painting, hopefully before she'd been observed by either.

The competition was declared at an end when the servants had set up the wind shields and tables ready for luncheon. Although the day had turned unseasonably warm and sunny, and the ladies had no need of the warm cloaks they'd brought, it was still too cool to sit still comfortably for much longer. Gillie stood with the other ladies and moved around a little, as the gentleman examined all the finished paintings.

As Gillie had expected, Lady Crowmore's showed real skill and appreciation of color. "It's beautiful," she said generously.

Lady Crowmore wrinkled her nose. "It's adequate."

Adequate to win, no doubt, Gillie thought. She was the kind of woman, beautiful, spoiled, and wealthy who won at everything from childhood on.

"Ah, there you are," Lord Wickenden murmured coming upon her as she made her way back to her own painting. "After luncheon, you should walk with Lady Frances."

"Should I?"

"Most definitely. I have won our wager."

She couldn't help the flush that seeped into her face. "Why should you imagine that?"

One of his satanic brows lifted. "Because Lady Braithwaite gave her public permission for her daughters' carriages to stop outside your door. You would appear to be rehabilitated." A smile lurked on his lips, though something darker and more exciting sparked in his eyes at the same time. "And I intend to collect today."

Chapter Eight

AS GILLIE'S FACE flamed, Wickenden blandly tipped his hat and strolled on to meet Lord Braithwaite and the other men. Gillie turned her back, pretending to admire the other end of the ruin while her cheeks cooled. But there was nothing she could do about the butterflies diving and soaring in her stomach.

After a brief confab, the gentleman voted and Lord Braithwaite announced, "This is unfortunate! My sister Frances and Lady Crowmore have each received three votes! I didn't vote for obvious reasons, and I'm now told that mine must be the casting vote. Therefore, while commending all the ladies' work, I pronounce Lady Crowmore to be the winner."

"Congratulations," Gillie said to her genuinely. "You are a worthy winner."

"Only because Braithwaite is too honorable to vote for his sister," Lady Crowmore said dryly. "But I thank you for the sentiment. I haven't seen your painting yet, have I?"

"You wouldn't want to," Gillie said hastily, but it was too late, Lady Crowley had turned the easel toward her. For a moment, her beautiful eyes scanned the paper, then she gave a quick, short laugh.

"That bad?" Gillie said without rancor.

"Oh lord, no. I was just thinking, yours has much more character than mine – which is curiously apt." She unpinned the paper from the easel. "If you care to, I'll exchange my painting for yours."

Gillie blinked. "You definitely get the poorer deal there!"

"Is that a yes?"

"Of course, if you truly wish it."

Lady Crowmore bent and placed Gillie's painting in her drawing case, then unpinned her own and handed it to Gillie. "There. An exchange of valuable gifts. Aren't you hungry? Thank God for luncheon."

The al fresco luncheon turned out to be quite fun, with amusing banter between London friends and between Blackhaven inhabitants, and yet the two mixing much better than Gillie had imagined. Lord Braithwaite was kind to Catherine Winslow, and Bernard sat at Lady Crowmore's side, apparently content to be ignored while she talked to just about everyone else. To her relief—yes, truly, it was relief—Lord Wickenden did not sit beside her, but between Lady Serena and Mrs.

Hoag, the vicar's wife, civilly dividing his attention between each, although the meal was so informal that no one stuck to the rule of never shouting across the tables.

Afterward, Lady Frances stood up and pronounced. "A brisk half hour's walk, I think, to warm us all up, and then back to Blackhaven! For those who want to walk, that is. Feel free to sit in the carriages and the servants will bring you blankets!"

As everyone rose, discussing preferences, Frances added. "Oh Gillie, will you help me to find that tree we climbed? The one I fell out of!"

Gillie, feeling Wickenden's gaze on her, refused to look at him. She refused to be commanded into such a thing. She said, "Oh no, I'd hate to even glance at that wretched tree again. When I think what might have happened to you – to say nothing of the mighty scold we received from everyone."

Wickenden laughed, though whether at her or at something else going on around him wasn't clear. But Frances didn't even bat an eyelid. "Don't be silly," she said, taking Gillie's arm with affection. "We haven't talked properly since I've come home. Wickenden, you may come with us if you choose—to defend us from the lions we were convinced inhabited these woods."

"Is that why you climbed the tree?" Wickenden inquired.

"Actually, yes," Frances admitted.

"Then I am at your disposal, and promise to wrestle any lions to the death," Wickenden said.

There seemed nothing for it but to give in with good grace. After all, he could hardly touch her, let alone claim his kiss, in Frances's presence. The rest of the party were wandering off in various directions, some into the carriages before they caught a chill. Arm-in-arm with Lady Frances and with Lord Wickenden beside them, Gillie walked across the hill toward the wood.

"How did your encounter with Senora Muir this morning turn out?" Wickenden asked.

"Well, the solicitors told her she couldn't turn us out without confirmation of the evidence. My hope is that she'll find it all more difficult than she'd thought and vanish." She frowned. "What I don't understand is why she's bothering in the first place. There is no great fortune involved here,"

"Desperate people will go to great lengths for very little."

For some reason, she thought of the one glimpse she'd had of the woman when she hadn't looked haughty or angry. In the street, with her arm across her belly, an expression of pain and maybe even fear on her face as she turned away. Gillie shook her head. She would not allow herself any softening toward a woman who tried to lie her way

into her home...though perhaps she could go and see her and try to find out what was really going on here.

"And your other problem?" Wickenden murmured.

"No notable developments," replied Gillie, who'd almost forgotten about them in the domestic crisis.

"I called on Colonel Fredericks," Wickenden said, politely holding an obstructive branch out of the way to let the ladies keep on the path as they entered the wood. "But he has a cold and is not receiving. I didn't want to leave anything with the servant."

"Quite right," Gillie approved. "There's been no more trouble. I think you must have scared those men right away."

"It's quite strange listening to you two converse," Lady Frances observed. "I understand the individual words, but they don't seem to make much sense when you connect them up."

"I'm sure Serena told you about my adventure the night of the ball," Gillie said lightly.

"She did," Frances admitted. "But I am sworn to secrecy and not allowed to mention it."

"Lady Frances is one of the few women I know who can keep a secret," Wickenden observed.

"Then you know too many of the wrong women," Frances said tartly, but Gillie understood his meaning with a hint of panic overlaid with a most peculiar sense of anticipation.

Her suspicions were confirmed when, without any guidance whatsoever, Frances turned off the path and made straight for the tree she'd once fallen out of. Without a word, she sat on the thick branch which grew at just the right height for such a purpose, and drew a small book from her reticule.

"Five minutes, my lord," she said calmly. "No more."

"Or what?" Wickenden mocked.

"Or I'll send my husband after you."

Gillie, torn between gratitude and a sense of betrayal, hesitated beside the tree, gazing helplessly at Frances. Without looking up from her book, the lady closed one eye.

"Go on," she murmured. "Most women of my acquaintance would give their teeth for even a five minute assignation with Wickenden. *Carpe diem*, Gillie."

She glanced uncertainly at the wicked baron. He stood beside her, offering his arm, but made no effort to either take her hand or persuade her. Despite his reputation and his erratic manners, he was, intrinsically, a gentleman. She liked that about him. She liked far too many things about him.

Quietly, she laid her hand in the crook of his arm and they began to walk through the trees, away from Frances.

“How did you persuade her?” Gillie demanded.

“We have become good friends and she trusts me.”

Gillie glanced at him. “You mean you covered for her indiscretions in London?”

A flicker of a smile passed across his face. “You are very quick.”

“I’ve known her a long time.”

“They were quite innocent indiscretions,” Wickenden assured her. “But much as I like Lady Frances, I did not bring you here to talk about her.”

“It is not gentlemanly to insist on this claim of yours,” she blurted. “I never even agreed to your silly wager in the first place. Besides, your behavior now will undo everything you’ve already done to help me.”

“A decent martialing of the arguments,” he mocked. “But I brought Lady Frances to keep you safely chaperoned.”

“And abandoned her back there,” Gillie said indignantly, waving one hand at the trees now separating them from her old friend.

“Of course. I don’t like to kiss you in public.” He halted and turned her toward him.

She tried to throw up her hands to ward him off. “Then you shouldn’t kiss me at all!” One hand had got trapped in his arm, and he caught the other without effort, closing what little distance remained between them. She took a panicked step back and stumbled against a tree. He followed at once, trapping her with his large body.

“But I won,” he said softly. “Pay up.”

She stared up at him, half defiant, half desperate. He didn’t move, just gazed back at her, occasionally dipping his eyes to her lips. His nearness undid her. And he knew, damn him, he knew that she wanted to give in, whatever dull propriety was shouting in her ear.

“Don’t look so scared,” he whispered. “You’ve kissed me before.”

“In the dark.” God knew why that mattered, and it brought a flicker of a smile to his intense, too-warm eyes.

“It still counts,” he assured her. “And sometimes daylight is better. Let’s see.”

His head blocked out the dappled sunlight and quite unhurriedly, he claimed her mouth. She couldn’t seem to control it, for her trembling lips parted to the touch of his and God help her, it was sweet, intense, and powerful. Only birds’ song broke the silence. They might have been the only two people in the world, and just for an instant, she wanted to weep. The moment seemed too perfect, the happiness too overwhelming.

He released her hand and she brought it up to touch his face, to caress the faint stubble growing back on his jaw. His breath seemed to catch and then he opened her mouth wider, and his tongue caressed

hers. It struck her that his every kiss was different and she wanted more, so much more. Heat spread through her whole body, weakening her, and yet it was she who pressed closer to him, feeling the exciting hardness against her abdomen.

Somewhere, she knew there was danger in this. She was playing with fire and she didn't understand the rules of the game. Right now, it felt as though she were winning. The kiss went on and on, as if his lips would never leave hers. As if she ever wanted them to.

And then, very slowly, his mouth began to loosen. Instinctively, she clung to him, her fingers threaded in his short, crisp hair holding harder. A soft, exciting groan rumbled inside him, and for another few, blissful moments the kiss intensified again, but gradually, inexorably, he released her mouth and raised his head.

"I shall have to come up with another wager," he said unsteadily, cupping her cheek in his hand.

"Or a dark tunnel," she blurted, and he smiled, one of those rare, dazzling smiles of pure amusement that had undone her from the beginning. Undone? What was she thinking. She'd only kissed him. Several times now, and each time better, more shattering than the last.

Oh, God help me, I love him.

The knowledge, which should have scared her to death, caused such a fresh surge of happiness that she found herself smiling back. Her lips felt curiously tremulous.

He rubbed his thumb over her lower lip. "How did I get through thirty years of my life without knowing you?"

"Lots of people do, I believe."

His fading smile quickened again and he hugged her to his side, spinning her around to walk back the way they'd come.

Gillie tried to drag herself out of her bemused state, guiltily smoothing her dress and touching her hair to check the pins. "Frances will know," she said anxiously.

"I was very careful with you," Wickenden said, "in case you didn't notice. But we'll walk slowly and talk of dull things. Tell me about the abbey's history?"

"Oh that isn't dull at all," Gillie insisted and told him a colorful and no doubt apocryphal tale about the monks facing down Henry VIII's men when they came to close Blackhaven Abbey.

He listened with a faintly amused smile playing on his lips, but at least Gillie began to feel a little more normal, with the mere echo of passion tingling on her lips in her lethargic body. They rediscovered Frances replacing her book in her reticule, having already risen to march in their direction.

When they emerged from the woods, most of the others were

already gathered and separating into carriages. With a merely civil smile, Lord Wickenden tipped his hat to the ladies and strolled across to where his horse was tethered. Gillie tried not to watch him.

"Well?" Frances murmured impatiently, taking her arm once more as they made their way toward the carriages.

"Well what?" Gillie asked absently.

"Did he propose to you?"

Gillie's gaze flew to her old friend in astonishment. "Of course he did not!"

"Oh," Frances said, her face falling. "I thought that's what his little assignation was all about."

"I'm not exactly of his world, am I?" Gillie said reasonably, unable to understand why her heart, so happy only moments ago, had begun to ache. "We just had a silly wager, and then he wanted to talk about what happened the night of the ball."

"Couldn't he do that in front of your aunt or me?"

"I think he prefers to tease me."

"Hmm," Frances said, not quite pleased. "I feel misled, though whether by him or by you is anyone's guess!"

*

WICKENDEN, IN FACT, had difficulty keeping his thoughts on anyone or anything other than Gillie and his own raging lust. Which may have been why, as he and Braithwaite rode along beside the carriages, he paid so little attention to the rabbit holes at the side of the track. Certainly, he failed to point them out to his friend, who, riding on the outside, was in much more danger from them. Only when Braithwaite's horse screamed and fell did he react, leaping from his own horse to help his friend.

Braithwaite's horse heaved itself back on its feet, trembling, leaving the earl on the ground.

"Damn, are you hurt?" Wickenden asked, crouching down beside him, while Bernard Muir jumped down from the nearest carriage to grab the horses.

"Devil a bit," Braithwaite replied with a cheerfulness that sounded forced to Wickenden. "Here, help me up."

Wickenden clasped his elbow and began to pull, but Braithwaite couldn't muffle his groan of agony.

"Damn and blast," the earl said shakily. "I think I've broken my leg."

Some things never left you. Wickenden straightened his friend's leg before the true pain set in and issued curt orders for wood and bandages to make a splint. Braithwaite still tried to laugh it off,

although his voice was hoarse and somewhat shaky.

Everyone ran around wringing their hands in horror or trying to be useful, according to their nature. Braithwaite's sisters, white-faced, tried to cheer him up with insults, although their hands clung together for support. Wickenden took a flask from his pocket and poured some brandy down the earl's throat.

"Thank God," Braithwaite said fervently. "When you run out, there's one in my coat, too. Is the horse hurt? What the devil happened to him?"

"Rabbit hole," Wickenden said succinctly. "He's limping a bit but still walking. I'll check him out when we get back." He broke off to take a piece of wood from young Winslow and swiftly cut it with his own knife to better suit his purpose.

It was Gillie who tore up her petticoats for bandages, although Wickenden imagined she had fewer garments than anyone else present. Together with his own necktie and a few ruthlessly extracted from his fellows, there were enough to bind the splint to his leg.

While he set about it, he heard Gillie suggesting someone ride ahead and fetch Doctor Morton to the castle.

Wickenden took out his flask again. "We're going to move you into the carriage. I'm afraid it might hurt."

"Give him this," Kate Crowmore said, stepping down from the carriage to place a small crystal bottle in his hands. For once, he was grateful to see it.

"Open your mouth," he commanded Braithwaite.

"Why, what's that?" Braithwaite demanded suspiciously.

"Laudanum. Trust me, it will help."

While Braithwaite opened his mouth to deny the necessity, Wickenden deftly spilled a few drops over his lips and passed the bottle back to Kate. Then, with the help of Bernard and Winslow, he lifted the earl and they maneuvered him into the carriage.

Gillie and Kate had placed cushions against the side wall of the coach so that he could sit against them with his legs out straight. He closed his eyes immediately, and Wickenden could almost see the waves of pain rolling over him.

There wasn't much more he could do about that. "It'll get easier," he murmured, gripping the earl's shoulder for an instant. "Hold on to that."

Jumping down, he caught Lady Serena about to mount the carriage steps to her brother. "You should go with Lady Frances," he said quietly.

"Someone needs to care for him in there..."

"Let Gillie and Kate do it. He won't like you to see him in such pain."

Serena stared at him, then at Frances and Gillie.

"He's right," Gillie said ruefully. "We'll look after him until we get to the castle, I promise."

*

DINNER AT THE castle was, understandably, a slightly subdued affair. Although the countess and her daughters tried to keep up light conversation, their anxiety for the earl was obvious. The party broke up early to go to their own rooms and leave the family alone together.

Braithwaite himself seemed to be asleep, exhausted by pain and Kate Crowmore's laudanum.

Wickenden, leaving his bedchamber door open since he wasn't averse to company to distract him from thoughts of his friend's pain—and of Gillie, if he were honest—pushed up the window sash and let the cool sea breeze whip around his face.

He'd dismissed his valet already. Only a single candle burned beside his bed, but he liked the darkness, outside and in. It seemed to match the thoughts in his heart.

"He'll survive, you know," said a familiar voice from the doorway.

Wickenden straightened and turned to see Kate leaning against the doorframe—one of her unladylike and yet most endearing poses. He wondered how long she'd been there.

"I know," he said. "It seems to be a clean fracture and didn't break the skin. Besides which, he's strong as an ox,"

"Exactly. So why are you so miserable? Longing for the old days when you were surrounded by pain and gore?"

"You mean by the glory of war?" he said sardonically.

"Is that not what I said?"

He walked across the room toward her, picking his coat off the bed as he passed. It seemed a nod toward civility although he couldn't actually be bothered putting it on.

"What do you want, Kate?"

"Do I have to want something?"

He leaned his shoulder against the wall opposite her, "Well, I don't believe you came to talk about either war or Braithwaite. Although I have to thank you for your care of him."

"No, you don't. In any case, I only supplied the knockout drops. It was your friend, Gillie, who knelt beside him and kept him still during the journey. She has...grit. I can see why you like her."

"Can you?" he said wryly.

Easing her back off the door, she moved into the room, pushing the door over to give them privacy. In typically Kate fashion, she ignored convention and possible scandal. "What was your generous plan? To

show the world that a very eligible man was considering marriage and then leave as if she'd rejected you?"

"Something like that."

"But you didn't let her in on it, did you?"

"She understands. She isn't a fool."

"Well, that's debatable. But either *you* are, or you're being unkind. Can you not see how she looks at you? Are you so used to the adulation of women?"

"Adulation?" he scoffed. "*Gillie?*"

"She doesn't *moon* after you," Kate allowed. "But you must be blind not to see that the girl is in love with you."

"Oh nonsense," he said, impatiently. "I brightened her dull life – and mine—with a few days of flirtation. There is no harm done."

"Idiot," Kate said without heat. "It has already gone beyond that, even for you. Unfortunately, you're in a cleft stick. Because of her station, you can't take her as your mistress. But equally, her station isn't high enough for you to marry her. So for God's sake, do the decent thing and leave her alone."

Wickenden scowled at her. These were the thoughts he'd been trying increasingly *not* to think.

"Miss Muir is your friend, now?" he said with sarcasm.

"On the contrary, she dislikes me cordially. Though mainly, I suspect, because someone passed on to her rumors about you and me."

He stared at her from his unchanged position against the wall. "There have been no rumors about you and me for at least seven years."

"We could make some," she said outrageously. "After all, you and I are, to some extent at least, unfinished business."

Kate had broken his heart once. When he'd been very young, a promising officer but a second son with no great prospects. She'd loved him, but chosen to marry Crowmore. Ironical, since he'd become his father's heir shortly after the wedding. She'd thrown herself at him once or twice, when he'd first entered the London world of fashion, but there had been too much between them for an honest relationship. Or he'd been too piqued to indulge himself. God knew she was a beautiful woman, and thoroughly desirable. And if the wit he'd once loved had grown a little acerbic, well, that suited her, too. He knew there was still a sweetness inside her somewhere. And he'd grown to admire the new bravery she'd found, such as hadn't been there when they'd both been young.

He straightened and deliberately kicked the door shut before walking toward her. Taking her by both shoulders, he gazed down into her face. He read eagerness and just a little fear in there. And

blatant desire. How easy it would be to slake his lust in her now...

Except, she would no longer be his Kate. The best of his Kate. As she most definitely was not his Gillie.

He touched his forehead to hers and released her. "Go," he said.

For a moment she didn't move. Her breath caught as if she would take matters into her own hands, but then, perhaps she read in his eyes that despite his temptation it would make no difference. She didn't even utter a parting shot as she left, and normally, she did those rather well.

Chapter Nine

BY THE TIME Gillie returned from the castle, it was getting dark. A solitary lamp had been lit in the hallway, but brighter lights shone from the cellar.

“Bernard?” she called. Considering recent events, she was reluctant to go down there alone, and yet, if the cellar had been opened from the tunnel...

Bernard stuck his head out of the cellar door. “You’re back. How is his lordship?”

“In terrible pain, I think, but they’re making him comfortable. What are you doing down there?”

“Apparently we had some visitors while we were gone,” Bernard said grimly. “Fortunately, Danny was ready for them and they didn’t come beyond the new door we put up at the end of the tunnel, but you know if they’re determined to get in here they will, one way or another.”

“Maybe we should just have them taken up by the Watch for breaking in. It might keep us safer while we worry about the rest of this mess.”

“Yes, but we have to catch them first! Or the Watch does. And no one seems to know where they’re staying. Lord Braithwaite’s people couldn’t find them either.” Bernard began to climb the stairs. “Shall we have dinner? I’m starving.”

Gillie discovered her aunt dozing in the parlor. She was about to creep out again and go to the kitchen when she noticed an envelope propped up on the mantel shelf. Walking over, she saw it had her name on it, inscribed in a hand she did not recognize.

Her first thought made her heart lurch. Lord Wickenden.

But that was foolish. Why would he write to her when he had been in her company for most of the day? Right up until half an hour ago, in fact. Besides, the script looked rather feminine to Gillie. She tore it open and saw at once she was right. It was a brief message on one side of a single sheet, signed Lillian Derwent. The note invited Miss Gillyflower Muir to call on Mrs. Derwent tomorrow morning at the Blackhaven Hotel, at her earliest convenience.

For a moment, Gillie couldn’t think who on Earth Mrs. Derwent was. Then she remembered that Kit Grantham’s mother had remarried quite recently—something Kit hadn’t been entirely happy about before

he left for Spain, although he had cheered up when his stepfather had purchased his captaincy for him. Gillie was sure his name had been Derwent.

Perhaps Kit's mother too, was worried about Captain Grantham's somewhat erratic behavior. It was probably pain from his wound.

The following morning, Gillie took Mrs. Derwent at her word, and, with Mattie in attendance, walked round to the hotel before church.

The Blackhaven Hotel was a sprawling collection of buildings joined into one behind an impressive new façade and a large, pillared portico leading to the front door.

Sparrow, the doorman, was one of her father's retired soldiers. As usual, he grinned at her, greeting her by name as he opened the door for her. She paused to ask after his family and pronounce her pleasure in their good health and then walked across the wide foyer to the reception desk. It was deserted save for a weary looking young man who barely remembered to take his elbows off the desk to address her. Presumably, she didn't look wealthy enough for the establishment.

"Good morning," she said civilly. "Please be so good as to inform Mrs. Derwent that Miss Muir waits upon her."

"Take a seat, Miss, and I'll send someone up to her."

"Thank you." Gillie hesitated a moment, while the young man sent someone scurrying up the staircase with her message. Then she said, "I understand you have a Mrs. Muir staying with you also. Do you happen to know if she's receiving?"

The young man frowned with apparent disapproval. "Foreign lady? French or the like."

"Spanish, I believe," Gillie replied patiently.

"She isn't here anymore."

Gillie blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"She and the gentleman settled up yesterday and left."

"Did she leave a forwarding address?" Gillie asked.

"No, she didn't."

"Thank you," Gillie said faintly.

Signaling to Mattie to come also, she chose one of the comfortable sofas facing into the hotel coffee room. Her thoughts raced. Had she and Bernard really won as easily as that? Had the supposed Mrs. Muir taken fright at the mere mention of investigation and fled before she was found out?

It did seem the likeliest explanation and one she was certainly disposed to believe. Surely everything else would be fine if the problem of the grasping stepmother was only removed.

Excerpt for the problem of Smuggler Jack and the traitors, of course. And Lord Braithwaite's leg. And the fact that Lord Wickenden was leaving tomorrow and her chances of ever seeing him again were

truly remote. For some reason, this last seemed the most terrible event of all, and yet it was laughably unimportant to anyone but Gillie.

Still, she would have the memory of his wicked charm and his even more wicked kisses to hug to herself. In time, that would be enough. She certainly wasn't the type of milksop to pine away for love. She had too much pride and too many responsibilities for that.

A very stern looking ladies' maid made her stately way down the staircase and across the foyer to Gillie.

"Mrs. Derwent will receive you upstairs," she pronounced, without even a curtsy, as if she and Gillie were of the same station in life. "Please follow me."

Beside her, Gillie could feel Mattie bridling, but she quelled her with a look. She'd heard Serena and Frances prattling about ladies maids who were so puffed up with their mistress's importance that they barely acknowledged duchesses as their equals. Gillie didn't bear a grudge about such trivia, though she preferred to judge people on their character than their class.

"Wait here," she murmured to Mattie, and followed the superior maid up the staircase and along the quiet passage. The maid opened a door on the left and entered first, announcing, "Miss Muir, madam."

Mrs. Derwent, in a very fine morning gown of lavender wool, was seated at her desk, writing letters or something else that was clearly of more importance than the morning caller she herself had summoned. Despite her tolerance of the maid, Gillie began to bridle at such rudeness. However, before she could actually open her mouth, the lady rose and turned to face her.

She was younger than Gillie had imagined, and the remains of beauty still lingered in her face and trim figure. She could see the resemblance to Kit at once, although her expression was less open than his.

"Please," the lady said, waving her hand toward one of the two chairs placed in the center of the room. She didn't offer to shake hands. Mrs. Derwent took the other chair without waiting for Gillie to sit first.

"Mrs. Derwent, I beg you will not—"

"I shall come at once to the point," Mrs. Derwent interrupted. "How much do you require to leave my son?"

Gillie blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

Mrs. Derwent narrowed her eyes. "How much to leave my son?" she repeated deliberately.

"Forgive me, I have no idea what you are talking about," Gillie replied. "Do I gather that you are Captain Grantham's mother?"

"Yes, and I assure you I am quite up to your flim-flam. Your tricks will not work on a mother."

“Flim-flam?” Gillie repeated, anger beginning to drown her bewilderment. “Tricks? *What* tricks? To my knowledge, I have never met you in my life before.”

“Whatever tricks gained you influence over my son, and even Lord Wickenden, whom I’ve never taken for anyone’s fool before.”

“Lord Wickenden?” she repeated. She must stop repeating the woman’s words. She sounded as insane as Mrs. Derwent. “What has he to do with your son?”

“Did he not speak to you on the subject? From his letter, I was quite sure that he had not, which is why I have come in person.”

“What subject?” Gillie asked.

“About leaving my son alone! He will not be permitted to marry you, as Lord Wickenden should have explained.”

The world seemed to tilt around Gillie. Suddenly, everything made horrible sense. Wickenden’s questions about Kit, his cutting in on her waltz with Kit, his apparent, inexplicable interest in her. Distracting her, weaning her, as he supposed, from Kit.

Refusing to let the terrible idea run away with her, she regarded Mrs. Derwent with caution. “Are you saying you sent Lord Wickenden here with the express purpose of preventing my marriage to Captain Grantham?”

“As much as one can ever send him anywhere,” Mrs. Derwent said with a touch of bitterness. “It seemed more discreet than posting all the way up here myself. Until I discovered the work was not yet done. But understand this, Miss Muir, no gaming house wench will ever sully my son’s name. You will take this one chance offered you, today, or the offer will be withdrawn and you will not get a penny.”

“You wish to buy me off marriage with your son,” Gillie said, fascinated. Somewhere deep inside her a maelstrom was rising, a whirling confusion of emotion. “What on earth gave you the idea that I was going to marry him?”

“He told me so himself as soon as he came home from Spain.”

Gillie closed her mouth. Kit had imagined he was saving her from ruin. If only he would have listened to her.

“Don’t imagine you’ll get any more from marriage. Kit’s father was not a wealthy man and he will get nothing from his stepfather, not for such a marriage. If you know what’s good for you, you’ll take my offer today and vanish without trace into whatever darkness you emerged from in this dreadful little town.”

The maelstrom enveloped Gillie. She sprang to her feet. The world was falling in around her. She’d been treated rudely and insulted in just about every conceivable way by this woman, and worse than that, by Lord Wickenden, who’d never stopped insulting her from their very first meeting. That was Gillie’s mistake, her naivety and loneliness.

But *this*, she would not take.

"You mistake true love," she said frostily. "Nothing will keep me from marrying Captain Grantham. Good day, madam."

The maid, who was either too stunned or too rude to open the door for her, merely gawped as Gillie stalked from the room and quietly closed the door behind her. No one would ever call into question *her* manners. On the other hand, she was actually shaking as she all but strode down the passage and descended the staircase. She could not be still, not yet, and yet she felt physically sick.

From the foyer, she rushed into the coffee room where she knew there were writing materials and sat down in an alcove to pen a short but urgent summons to Kit. She wrote his direction at the barracks on the folded note and stood. She didn't even glance at the reception clerk, though she was aware he now stood straight behind his desk as if suddenly impressed by her haughty attitude. If only he'd known there was nothing haughty about her. It was sheer fury. Mattie, equally awed, scurried after her.

And yet she was held together by a thread so gossamer thin it could break at any moment and she'd just...unravel.

"Sparrow," she greeted the doorman, delivering the missive into his hands together with a couple of coins. "Could you please have one of your boys deliver this to Captain Grantham?"

"Course, Miss," he said, grinning and tipping his tall hat. "It's as good as done."

"Thank you, Sparrow."

Since storming into church in such a state was neither advisable nor terribly Christian, Gillie forced herself to breathe deeply and think calmly. By the time she entered the church, she was no less angry, but at least she had it under control. And in fact, the familiar ritual of the service helped significantly. By the time she left, she was quite capable of exchanging pleasantries with Mrs. Percy, Mrs. Hoag, and other acquaintances in town. Several people asked her about the earl's accident, so at least she was able to dispel rumors of his untimely death.

WITH THE WHIRLPOOL fury inside her, Gillie almost forgot to tell Bernard and Aunt Margaret the good news that the Spanish woman calling herself Mrs. Muir appeared to have left Blackhaven.

"Which doesn't mean she won't come back," she allowed over luncheon. "But at the very least, she's not sitting on our doorstep waiting for us to leave."

"She's running for cover," Bernard said with satisfaction. "We've scared her off. Or at least the solicitors did! Never thought so highly of old Worthing in my life."

"If you please, ma'am," Charles the footman interrupted further speculation. "Captain Grantham is here. I put him in the parlor."

"Oh good," Bernard commented. "He must be over his sulks."

"I asked him to call," Gillie said, rising from the table. "I'll just go and have a word with him. Join us when you're ready."

It wasn't quite proper, but Kit was such an old friend and so trusted that her aunt made no objection.

Gillie found him by the parlor window, gazing down at the street below. He turned as she entered. His continued stiffness of manner was overlaid with curiosity and something very like hope.

Guilt joined the maelstrom in Gillies' heart.

"Kit, I've done something very bad," she said ruefully.

The stiffness vanished into despair. "What?" he asked in a strangled voice.

"Your mother is here."

He blinked, frowning. "I know. I've been summoned. I'm on my way to see her now. What has that to say to anything?"

"I was summoned, too," Gillie said with a sigh. "I called on her this morning."

"Oh dear," Kit said, a quite different anxiety in his voice. "Was she awful?"

"Unbearable," Gillie said frankly. "And the upshot was I told her we were in love and that nothing would prevent my marrying you."

Kit started toward her, his face clearing. "Really?"

"Of course not really!" Gillie exclaimed. "That is, of course we're not truly going to be married, but I'm afraid I really told her we were."

Kit searched her face. "So you asked me here to warn me," he suggested. "Or to ask me to tell her the truth?"

Gillie twisted her hands together and sat down in the nearest chair. "Actually, I asked you here to request a favor. Would you mind very much pretending we *are* engaged?"

He caught on after the briefest moment, an expression of rueful understanding in his eyes. "You wish to punish her for her unkindness."

"I'm afraid I do." More than that, of course, she wanted to punish Wickenden for his. It was the best way she knew of to prove she didn't care. And to jilt him in front of his fashionable friends after he'd pursued her so publicly to the extent that even Frances had imagined he meant to offer her marriage. She drew in her breath, forcing her thoughts away from Wickenden and back to Mrs. Derwent. "I'm sorry, since she is your mother, but she was unforgivably rude. She tried to buy me off!"

Kit closed his eyes. "I should never have spoken of you in front of

her." His eyes opened again, direct and honest. "I was just home and catching up with letters which told me of your doings here in Blackhaven and I blurted out something about marrying you to save you from yourself. I should have known she would totally misunderstand. In my defense, I can only say I was upset and worried about you. In my mother's defense I can only say *she* is upset and worried about *me*! Give her time to speak to other people, especially Lady Braithwaite, and I'm sure you'll find her changed."

"Well it doesn't really matter," Gillie said hastily, "because of course we're not really going to be married. We'll call it off in a day or so."

"A day or so?" he repeated blankly, and she saw with yet more guilt that he wanted to use their false engagement to somehow create a true one. But in truth, her real reason for the pretense would be gone tomorrow.

"Well, we'd be lying to our friends as well," she said. "We would not be comfortable keeping up the lie for so long. We can easily find some quarrel to part us – though not one so serious that we should never speak again. I'll think of something!"

"Gillie—" He broke off as the door opened again. Gillie could hear her aunt's voice and imagined she and Bernard had arrived to interrupt the *tête à tête*. However, it was Charles who stuck his head in the doorway first.

"Lord Wickenden, Miss," he said, and the wicked baron strode past him into the room.

Panic rooted Gillie to her chair. It was too soon to face him. She wasn't ready. She needed time to hate the handsome face which had deceived her, to turn those stupidly excited butterflies to mere contempt. But his gaze was already upon her and it was all she could do to keep her expression as blank as she could.

He must have found something about her strange, though, for he paused, a quick frown beginning to form on his brow before Kit rushed toward the door, his hand held out in triumph.

"Lord Wickenden! You must be the first to congratulate us. Miss Muir has agreed to be my wife."

Chapter Ten

No.

Why has she done that? She doesn't love him...does she?

Thank God I didn't speak... Like he had done ten years ago just before Kate jilted him...

That was different, Kate meant it. Gillie, is up to something.

He gazed past Grantham to Gillie, who still sat in the arm chair, unmoving. That she was distressed, he could not doubt, but she was trying desperately hard to cover it with a brittle, meaningless smile while her fingers clasped each other tightly in her lap.

Mechanically, briefly, he shook Grantham's hand. "Congratulations," he murmured, and strolled past him toward Gillie. Panic flickered in her eyes. He paused in front of her, and since she didn't offer, he bent and picked her hand out of her lap.

"What can I do?" he asked quietly.

Her fingers, even her palm, felt icy cold to his touch.

Her brow twitched, as though those weren't the words she'd expected to hear. "You may wish me happy," she said in a small, hard voice he'd never heard from her before.

"Then I do."

She withdrew her hand just as Bernard and the aunt came into the room. Her arm jerked, a swift, involuntary movement toward Grantham, who never even noticed as he blurted out his good news to Gillie's family. Wickenden noticed, though. It had been a pleading, hushing gesture, as though she hadn't wanted them to know.

And certainly, their reactions were comical enough. Bernard's jaw dropped quite spectacularly, and the aunt frowned, pulling at her ear. "What did you say? Gillie?" Her expression betrayed more consternation than joy.

Because he, Wickenden had raised expectations, just as Kate had said. Only it wasn't the wicked baron who was walking away. A glimmering of understanding began to form.

He didn't believe this sudden engagement was about love—not on Gillie's part anyway. It was about revenge.

The elder Miss Muir sat down and Bernard, recollecting himself, shook Grantham's hand with just a little too much enthusiasm. Wickenden promptly sat down on the chair next to Gillie's.

"I gave Jack's document to Colonel Fredericks," he murmured. "He

seemed surprised, though grateful. And appalled to hear of your abduction. He seems sure the villains will soon he caught.”

“Excellent,” Gillie said. “Thank you.”

Until she spoke to him like that, so coolly and carelessly, he hadn’t properly realized the full expressiveness of her normal voice.

“Well,” he said, rising once more. “I won’t take up any more of your time on this happy day.”

She made no move to detain him, merely offered him one careless hand. Clearly, she had herself under control now, had steeled herself for his touch. The thought didn’t please him.

“I suppose you’ll be leaving for London tomorrow,” she observed.

“I suppose I will.”

“Then I will bid you goodbye,” she said brightly.

“Merely adieu,” he insisted, retaining her hand when she would have withdrawn it, and deliberately kissing it. “Au revoir. Until we meet again.”

“Give Lord Braithwaite our best regards,” the aunt requested as he bade her farewell.

Wickenden inclined his head, a gesture that took in the two young men before he strolled out of the room. Captain Grantham was almost cheering. Poor fool. He imagined he’d won.

*

THAT THOUGHT CAME back to Wickenden as he walked away from the Muirs’. In fact, no one had won or could win. Kate was right. The game had gone too far. He’d already hurt Gillie enough to push her into the arms of a man she didn’t love.

Or am I just a great coxcomb to be imagining she cares for me?

Whatever, something had turned her quite suddenly against him. Something or someone.

On impulse, he turned left into Blackhaven High Street and walked toward the hotel. The more he thought of it, the more certain he was that this bore all the stamps of...

“Lillian,” he greeted her as he entered the foyer. “How fortunate.”

Lillian Grantham – or Mrs. Derwent as she was these days – was dressed in a fine lavender walking gown and matching pelisse. Her fetching bonnet bore lavender ribbons and flowers. She halted in her tracks, her eyes widening.

“Wickenden! How did you get here so fast?”

“I flew.”

Lillian had no sense of humor. “But I only sent the note five minutes ago. I asked you to come at four o’clock.”

“Four o’clock does not suit me. Would you like me to accompany

you somewhere or shall we sit in the coffee room?"

Clearly irritated, Lillian stared at him in consternation. "I am expecting my son in half an hour."

"I shan't detain you for half that time." Determinedly, he offered her his arm and she took it with reluctance, walking back the way she'd just come and allowing herself to be ushered into the quiet coffee room.

Impatiently, Wickenden waved away the waiter and sat down beside her. "I don't need to ask what you're doing here."

"Of course you don't. You were quite wrong about that girl and I was right. No intention of marrying my Kit? Why, she looked me straight in the eye, as bold as brass, I assure you, and announced that nothing would prevent her from marrying him!"

"What did you do?" Wickenden asked curiously. "Offer her money?"

Lillian lifted her chin. "I know her type."

"Clearly you don't. Before you came here, they weren't even speaking because she'd already turned him down and he was sulking. Five minutes with you, and Kit is announcing their engagement all over town. I've seen mad elephants in India cause less damage than you."

Lillian flushed. "I don't care for your tone, Wickenden."

"You're not really meant to." He eyed her dispassionately, wondering what the devil he'd ever seen in her. Of course, she'd been younger then, and prettier. And he'd been a lonely young subaltern getting over a broken heart, and flattered by the attentions of an attractive widow. Had she always been this stupid? "You brought my name into it, too, didn't you?"

"I might have mentioned you."

"Name dropping, to frighten her?" Wickenden guessed.

Lillian's lip curled. "She doesn't frighten. She has no shame."

Wickenden sighed and got to his feet. "Hard as it is for you to understand, Lillian, she has nothing to be ashamed of. Good afternoon."

*

GILLIE HADN'T REALLY thought out her fake engagement plan terribly well. It had been a spur of the moment decision that quickly got out of hand as not only Lord Wickenden but her less than pleased family were forced to congratulate Captain Grantham and wish her happy.

Bernard, however, could not contain himself beyond Kit's departure.

"Why engage yourself to him now?" he demanded. "You could

have hooked Lord Wickenden!"

"Nonsense," Gillie said frostily. "We merely found each other amusing during his stay here. But he leaves for London tomorrow. Nothing was ever going to come of his attentions, you know. It is just his manner."

Bernard, though inexperienced in affairs of the heart, knew his sister very well. "You're miffed with him. Is that what this is about? Trying to bring him up to the mark with a spot of jealousy?"

"Oh, Bernard, don't be so ridiculous," she snapped, rising to her feet and preparing to leave the room.

"Because playing such games with someone like him is a dangerous sport," Bernard warned, with what he obviously hoped was manly severity and worldly wisdom. "You'd be well served if he challenged poor old Kit and killed him!"

Gillie paused with her hand on the door knob, feeling her skin whiten. "He wouldn't do that." *Would he?* Surely he'd never cared about her enough... But she was making him look foolish, a lovelorn, wealthy dandy brushed off in favor of a poor officer with no fortune. At least that was her aim, and kindness had never played any part in it. On the other hand, she certainly didn't want blood on her hands, let alone Kit's.

For a moment, she actually considered calling the pretense off immediately, not just for Kit's sake but for Wickenden's own. He was in enough trouble over duels, and she had the uncomfortable feeling he didn't actually admire himself for them anyhow. They were feeding some deeper discontent within him.

I could have made him content, a wistful little voice whispered in her head. *I know I could.*

Of course you couldn't, she told herself severely. *He had no interest in you at all beyond weaning you from Kit and making a fool of you into the bargain. He probably laughs about it with his friends – perhaps not Lord Braithwaite, of course, but in London, I'd be the butt of all his jokes.*

It was lowering, hurtful, infuriating, but she would not give into it. He'd started the game on behalf of Kit's dreadful mother, but they'd both lose. She wasn't quite sure yet how she'd make Mrs. Derwent lose, but since Wickenden was her main target, she could brush Kit's mother aside for later. Kit himself was another matter.

Kit wasn't really playing her game. While happy to tell everyone about their engagement, she had the feeling he was using it to force her into an *actual* engagement, even to the point of marriage, either through habit or through the difficulty of actually breaking it off once the snowball of publicity was fully rolling. As it surely was.

The matter kept her awake that night, so that she rose on Monday morning unrested and exhausted, Nevertheless, taking Mattie and

Charles to help carry, she went shopping as usual, buying enough to make supper for tomorrow night's card party.

It was while she was buying meat from the market that she first noticed the watcher—a rough looking young man lounging by a fruit stall eating an apple. Although he was gazing in a different direction, she had the uncomfortable feeling he'd been looking at her the instant before. When she noticed him again from the cheese stall, she began to wonder uneasily if he was one of the men who'd abducted her the night of the ball. He didn't look familiar, but it had been dark.

She wished she'd brought Danny instead of Charles. On the other hand, she was sure no one would hurt her in so public a place, so she took her time, forcing herself to buy everything they needed before walking home.

Market Street, which ran between the market and the High Street, was the least salubrious neighborhood they had to pass through to go home. It housed the Black Inn, a questionable hostelry frequented, so people said, by seamen, smugglers, and thieves. Gillie had only ever seen fishermen come out of it, and a few ragged, often brightly dressed women. But all the same, she gave it a wide berth today and kept glancing back over her shoulder to see if the rough young man were following her.

She didn't see him, but unexpectedly, across the road beside the inn she caught sight of a familiar female figure dressed in black emerging from the inn doorway.

Damnation to her, she's still here, Gillie thought in frustration. *Though what on earth is she doing in that place? Surely villainy of some kind...*

She passed on, but unable to risk glancing back again a moment later, she saw her supposed stepmother halted in the street, her head pressed against the inn wall, her hand across her belly. Instinctively, Gillie started across the road toward her, for she was clearly ill and alone.

An improbably red-haired woman in a garish dress stepped out of the inn, saw what Gillie did and went to her at once.

"Come back inside," the woman said kindly. "Come now, I'll send for the midwife, you can't go out like this."

The Spanish woman made a weak effort to fend her off and took another stumbling step just as Gillie and Mattie arrived.

"What is the matter, ma'am?" Gillie demanded. "Do you need the doctor?"

"Midwife more like, miss," said the garish young lady. "It's her time. The baby's coming. She shouldn't be having it in that place, but better there than in the street."

Gillie glanced at her in consternation. "Is it so imminent? Does she

not have time to get back to her hotel?"

The garish girl glanced at her as if she'd grown horns. "Miss, her room is here. God knows why," she admitted, "for she clearly don't belong in it."

Isabella uttered a stifled moan. Gillie glanced dubiously from the inn door, where a seaman now stood, spitting on the step, to the helpless, agitated figure of her supposed stepmother – and made a decision.

"She must come home with us." She glanced at the redhead. "Could you please send the midwife to my house, which is The Haven in Cliff Crescent." She delved into her reticule in search of a coin.

"No need for that. Miss," the girl said. "You can pay her when she comes." She ran off, carelessly revealing a portion of long legs as her thin gown flapped around them.

"Miss, you can't bring *her* into your house," Mattie hissed. "What if it's a trick?"

"Does it look like a trick? Give your parcels to Charles and help me with her."

Isabella tried to pull away, a look of pure, naked fear in her eyes that caught at Gillie's breath.

"We're not going to hurt you," Gillie said, as calmly and gently as she could. "We're just taking you home."

Whether she didn't understand or didn't believe Gillie, Isabella continued to struggle, gasping.

"Isabella, please," Gillie pleaded, "You can't walk the streets or go back to that dreadful place. Think of your child."

Isabella stared at her, "Why?"

Gillie understood what she meant. But in truth she didn't really know the answer. "Compassion," she said. "But you still can't have my house."

Isabella let out a sound that might have been a laugh before she seemed to be overcome by pain again.

By dint of stopping and starting, they finally made it out of Market Street into High Street and then around to Cliff Crescent.

"Charles," Gillie said as soon as they were inside. "Drop all the parcels in the kitchen for Cook and then take Danny with you to Doctor Morton, tell him he has to come here to deliver a baby. *Dulcie!*"

Oddly enough, it was Dulcie who seemed to calm Isabella the most. The old woman stumped into the guest bedroom – which, in fact, had been Captain Muir's – and without fuss, approached the bed where Isabella lay under the blankets in her chemise. Dulcie felt Isabella's forehead and her belly.

The Spanish woman stopped panting and opened her eyes. "You

are Dulcie,” she said in heavily accented English. “You cared for Captain Muir’s other children.”

Dulcie glanced at her face. “That’s right. I did and I do.”

“I’ve sent for Doctor Morton,” Gillie said. “And the midwife is on her way.”

Dulcie scowled. “If it’s Maggie Maine, I’ll send her on her way. The woman hasn’t been sober this century! If I need help, I’ll get Jack’s wife!”

As good as her word, Dulcie did indeed send Maggie Maine the midwife packing. She tolerated Doctor Morton, though possibly only because he agreed with her that whatever pains had troubled Isabella, the baby would not come today. The pains had already stopped.

“This may happen several times before the baby actually chooses to be born,” he said jovially and departed with a curious glance at Gillie. Clearly, he knew all about Isabella’s claims and was puzzled by Gillie’s volte face in having her in the house.

When the doctor left, Gillie sat down on the edge of the bed. “Why were you staying in that place? The Black Inn?”

Isabella dragged her gaze free. “I did not like the hotel.”

Gillie blinked. “And you like the Black?”

Isabella shook her head.

“You can’t go back there,” Gillie said flatly.

“I have to go back there,” Isabella retorted. She glared at Gillie. “I have no money to go anywhere else.”

Gillie frowned. “You mean you are as strapped as we are?”

“Strapped?”

“Never mind. You have no money, either.”

Isabella looked away again. “My cousin, M. de Garnache, took what was left to pay a London solicitor.”

“And left you alone in that place?” Gillie said indignantly.

“We have no choice. You deprive me of home.”

Gillie stared at her. “Actually, it was you who tried to deprive *us* of our home.”

Isabella’s gaze fell and revived again. “You made me angry. Captain Muir was so proud of you and your brother. You’d have thought no other man had ever had children, certainly not children as perfect as you two. And yet I find you not even in mourning, holding wicked parties, gambling...”

“It’s not quite like that,” Gillie objected. “We all do what we must to survive. My father left us no money either, only the house. The card parties help with living expenses.”

“There are more respectable ways to earn a living,” Isabella pronounced.

“Yes?” Gillie said at once. “What ways have you found?”

Isabella flushed. "I am with child."

"And I chose to live in my family home, where I was born, with my brother, rather than move into a stranger's home to teach their children badly or to run errands for some spoiled, ill-natured old lady in hers. My father would have understood that."

"He would not understand you running a low gaming hell!"

"He would understand it better than his so-called wife throwing his children out of their family home! You would know that if you truly were who you say you are."

To her surprise, Isabella actually flushed. "I was angry but I never meant to...throw you out. I was advised to be harsh in my demands so that you would be happy to agree to lesser terms, such as sharing the house with me and closing your gambling den. I could not bring my child up in such a place."

Gillie regarded her curiously. "Why did you come here? Why not bring your child up at home?"

"My home is destroyed," she said flatly. "I have not the money to repair it. And who knows how long this war will go on? Captain Muir meant me to come to England with him."

"Of course," Gillie said. It came to her that she was believing in her stepmother – which was perhaps foolish. Being genuinely pregnant and in want didn't make the woman her father's wife. "How come your English has improved so much in two days?"

"I could always speak English. Do you imagine Captain Muir spoke Spanish?"

"Not a great deal," Gillie said honestly. "Only why deceive us using your cousin as interpreter?"

Isabella shrugged with a hint of weariness. "It was his idea. He said it would give me more distance."

"And allow him to make the conditions?"

"Perhaps."

"I don't understand what he gets out of all this," Gillie admitted. "Is he really just looking after you?"

Isabella's gaze flickered. "I thought he was."

"Perhaps he believes my father's estate to be more than it is," Gillie suggested.

Isabella stared at her hands, clearly unwilling to comment.

"Doctor Morton says you must stay here and rest."

Slowly, Isabella raised her gaze to Gillie's face, searching. "Why?"

They both knew she wasn't questioning the doctor's orders. The clop of several horses' hooves mingled with the trundling of carriage wheels to draw Gillie's attention. She stood and walked to the window. "I don't want you to be my father's wife." She gazed down on the little cavalcade making its way to the main road south. She didn't

know which carriage was Lord Wickenden's. She didn't want to. To Isabella, she said, "I don't want to lose my home."

"And so you don't trust your original instinct to doubt me," Isabella guessed.

Gillie's throat ached, but she fought it down and aimed for lightness. "Perhaps. And no one who doesn't either want to or have to should stay at the Black Inn!"

*

AUNT MARGARET AND Bernard were both appalled that she'd installed the enemy in Captain Muir's old bed-chamber.

"How are we to be rid of her now?" Bernard demanded. "Aren't we admitting something in law by allowing her in here?"

"I don't see how," Gillie argued. "But it is worth at least considering that she might be telling us the truth."

"And then what the devil are we to do?"

Gillie smiled ruefully. "I'd make a rotten governess."

"I'd make a worse tutor. Maybe I *will* be reduced to running an *actual* gaming hell. And what of Aunt Margaret?"

What indeed.

Chapter Eleven

WITH ALL THE excitement of discovering and caring for Isabella, Gillie forgot all about the young man she'd imagined watching her, until the following afternoon when she accompanied her aunt on a visit to Mrs. Hoag, the vicar's wife. It was definitely the same disreputable youth loitering at the corner of the crescent, and when she paused to glance in the new hat shop window, there he was again, shambling along the High Street. If it had been Danny rather than Charles who accompanied them that day, she'd have sent him to speak to the miscreant, but he didn't look at all the sort of person to be intimidated by the amiable Charles.

She didn't notice him skulking at the vicarage gates when they left again, and breathed a sigh of relief, but a few moments later, there he was again on the other side of the road, walking in the same direction as they were. The man never approached, or even appeared to look at them, and yet he was always there, a possible threat. Gillie resolved to speak to Danny just as soon as he came back in. He'd accompanied Bernard up to the castle that afternoon to enquire after Lord Braithwaite, who was not, it seemed, in any condition yet to travel back to London as planned.

The rest of the afternoon was enlivened by nothing more interesting than another quarrel with Isabella over the regular card party to be held that evening. For some reason, Isabella seemed to have imagined that her presence would put an end to proceedings, and she was furious when Gillie explained otherwise. Neither woman would be swayed or admit they were in the wrong. In the end, they parted in a state of civilized if tense neutrality. The party went ahead as planned.

Kit Grantham was one of the first guests to arrive, along with Major Randolph.

"This fellow won't believe in my luck until he hears it from you," Kit said cheerfully, throwing his hat to Charles, who caught it with a grin.

It spoke volumes for Gillie's distraction—and her motives—that she couldn't at first think what he was talking about. The false engagement had fallen to the back of her mind as soon as Lord Wickenden had left the house on Sunday. Her first emotion when Kit reminded her, was dismay. How could she have been so foolish as to

begin this lie? Now she was left with the unpalatable choice of either continuing it or making Kit look foolish in front of his friends.

Well, she would not marry just so that Kit could avoid looking foolish! It was she, after all, who had been stupid about the whole thing. She'd always known Kit would try to use it to turn pretense into reality.

But while Gillie smiled, desperately racking her brains for something neutral to say, Bernard butted in.

"You could have knocked me down with a feather," he told Randolph. "But there you are, the poor fellow will have her!"

"Poor fellow?" Kit exclaimed with mock outrage. "You be careful there, Bernie or I shall be forced to call you out for insulting my betrothed."

"Ha, if you ask me, it'll be Wickenden calling *you* out," Bernard murmured as they walked all together into the salon.

Kit wasn't quite pleased by that. A spark of irritation lit his eyes as he said lightly, "In that case, thank God that the castle party are all gone!"

"Wickenden hasn't," Bernard said carelessly, causing Gillie's heart to lurch painfully and her gaze to fly involuntarily to her brother's face. "I was up there this afternoon, and he's still there, entertaining poor old Braithwaite. Speak of the devil," he added, completing Gillie's panic.

She spun around, just as Wickenden entered the room and paused, his large, handsome person framed in the doorway. Why hadn't Bernard told her this? *Warned* her? Her hand reached blindly for support before she caught herself, straightened her arms, and plastered a social smile on her face. She was hostess here. It was her role to welcome guests.

She walked toward him, her hand held out. "Good evening, Lord Wickenden. What a pleasant surprise."

"Isn't it?" he said blandly. "I thought you were going to faint from disappointment."

"Disappointment?" she repeated in deliberately amused accents. Dear God, her heart was drumming with excitement just because he'd entered the room. Life suddenly was worth fighting for again – even if only to show this man how little she thought of him. "How could I be disappointed when you are so good for business?"

Amusement rather than outrage lit his eyes. "Always keep in character, my sweet. There is no point in pretending vulgarity at this stage."

Ignoring the inevitable flush of shame seeping under her skin, she said carelessly, "Forgive me, I was just thinking aloud."

"Come, walk in the garden with me and tell me how I've offended

you."

"Oh, I have no time for that this evening," she said. "Excuse me."

He let her go. She didn't know if she was more relieved or disappointed, just that the party had suddenly developed a spark of excitement, a glow that came only from his presence. Damn him. She could believe nothing he said, trust nothing he did.

And that made her want to cry, for she'd thought he was so different, that she'd found something with him that no one else could ever offer. She'd *liked* him.

She kept herself busy making sure her guests were happy and avoiding Kit who kept wanting to reintroduce her to people as his betrothed. Then, in the smaller salon, she'd just turned away from giving Mattie instructions about fresh wine decanters, when she found Lord Wickenden facing her once more.

"Or," he said, as if there had been no disruption to their last conversation. "I could tell you how I've offended you."

"Do I look offended?" she demanded with more than a hint of irritation.

"Every beautiful inch of you," he replied and in spite of herself, she flushed.

"I don't have time for such nonsense."

"Mrs. Derwent told you she'd sent me to keep you away from Kit."

"It really doesn't matter. I am not interested in other people's instructions. I merely wish to live my life without interference."

"With Kit."

"With Kit," she agreed defiantly.

"Miss Gillie," Mattie hissed behind her. "Dulcie wants to send for Doctor Morton. Is he here?"

"Why no," Gillie said in surprise, "I don't believe he is. Is Dulcie sick?"

"Not Dulcie, Miss. Mrs. Isabella."

"Oh goodness," Gillie uttered in dismay. "By all means, fetch Doctor Morton...and take Danny with you! Excuse me," she added once again to Lord Wickenden.

She all but ran upstairs to her parents' old bedchamber, where she discovered Isabella, who had been up and pottering around the house for most of the day, including meal times, now back in bed. She was attended not only by Dulcie but by Smuggler's Jack wife.

"Mattie's gone for Doctor Morton," Gillie said reassuringly.

Isabella, looking desperate, nodded and tried to smile.

"You'll be short-handed downstairs," Mrs. Jack remarked. "Why don't I come and help for now, and Dulcie can send for me if she needs me."

"Good idea," Gillie said vaguely. "It could be another false alarm,"

she warned Isabella. "The doctor did say there could be others."

"No, this feels different," Isabella whispered.

Dulcie nodded comfortably. "I think it's coming this time. But it's likely to be hours yet, so off you go, Miss Gillie and leave us be."

She pressed Isabella's shoulder, promised to come back in a little while, and left the room with Mrs. Jack. However, before Gillie even set foot on the stairs, she could already hear some kind of commotion downstairs. "Oh dear..."

Mrs. Jack paused uncertainly. Gillie descended a couple of stairs, far enough to be able to peer over the bannister to the front door.

"You won't keep us out!" a big, burly man was assuring a furious Charles as he barged past him with two other men. "We have reason to believe you're harboring smugglers in this house."

"It's the Watch," Gillie whispered, turning back to Jack's wife. "Is he in his bed-chamber?"

Mrs. Jack nodded.

"And the children?"

"In the kitchen," she said in dismay. "Harry Moore will know them for Jack's..."

"They won't harm the children. I've given you work because Jack has fled and we needed more staff for our entertaining. It's Jack himself we need to worry about. They'll have people watching the exits, so you'll never get him out. You'll have to hide him..." The perfect place struck her with shock and something very close to laughter. "Isabella's room. They'll never dare go in there..."

Without waiting for agreement, she rushed downstairs just as Bernard came out of the salon to see what all the commotion was about.

"What the devil's the meaning of this?" he demanded.

"We're looking for one Jack Sugden who was seen on these premises."

Bernard blinked. "No he wasn't."

"According to our report," said the big, burly man. He was the Harry Moore who would recognize Jack's children. He'd been here before, checking that one of their card parties was indeed private. He hadn't been able to prove otherwise. But somehow this rather more dangerous rumor had reached him now.

Brushing past Bernard, he paused in the salon doorway, staring around the room. Behind his back, Gillie exchanged glances with Bernard. The slight hush in the room beyond told them that several guests were now gazing at this ungenteel figure. If nothing else, it would convince him of the station of their guests.

"Do you imagine we invite smugglers to our soirees?" Gillie demanded. "Please don't upset our guests, many of whom have a great

deal of influence.”

Harry turned away. “Watch here,” he snarled at one of his underlings. “Joshua, look in the cellar. I’ll search the kitchen. After that,” he added with relish, “we’ll begin upstairs.”

“You will not!” Gillie said stoutly. With tacit agreement, she and Bernard split up, Bernard following Joshua to the cellar, Gillie following Harry through to the kitchen, haranguing him as she went. She didn’t glance back to the shadow now standing in the salon doorway, but she knew, somehow, that it was Lord Wickenden. Her humiliation felt complete.

Until it struck her that Wickenden was one of the few people who actually knew Jack was here. It froze her tongue in her mouth for almost a second. Bernard had once called him vengeful. She’d found him forgiving, although she now knew the reason for that. Even so, her mind boggled at him exacting such a petty revenge. Surely, it was just not in his character...

Inevitably, Harry discovered the children sitting around the kitchen table while a harassed Cook tried to prepare supper.

“Ha!” Harry exclaimed in triumph, pointing to the alarmed children. “Now, what, Miss Muir?”

Cook left off stirring her sauce to waddle over and put her arms around the children who were sniveling quite impressively, although without any tears. It was clearly a role they’d played before.

“They don’t look much like smugglers to me,” Gillie retorted. “Children, are any of you called Jack?”

“Don’t try and be clever with me, Miss. They’re Jack Sugden’s brats and no mistake.”

“I know who they are.”

“Then what are they doing here?”

“Waiting for their mother. Eliza works for me.”

“Since when?” Harry scoffed.

“Since her husband vanished and left her and her children hungry!”

“Such benevolence,” Harry sneered.

“Only in part. I did feel sorry for them, especially after their house was ransacked. But we needed more staff, with all the entertaining we do. Eliza seemed the perfect solution.”

“I’ll bet you didn’t get a character reference,” Harry said with contempt.

Gillie narrowed her eyes. “I don’t need one. I’ve known Eliza all my life. Now are you finished terrifying the children and upsetting my cook?”

Harry pulled open the door to the larder, sniffed loudly, and stuck his head into the tiny back door vestibule.

"Where is Eliza Sugden, then?"

"Serving wine to our guests, I imagine," Gillie said, "It's what I pay her for."

"Fetch her to me, if you'd be so good," Harry said, striding back through the kitchen. "Tell me, Miss," he added as they emerged back into the hallway. "If you're so short-staffed when you entertain, why did two of your servants leave the house ten minutes ago?"

"Because I sent them to fetch Doctor Morton, if it's any of your business."

Harry paused and stared at her. "Jack's wound playing up, is it?"

"I have no idea. I sent for the doctor to attend my stepmother who is currently *en travail*."

"She's what?"

"Giving birth to her child! You must see that we have our hands full here without your men tramping about the house upsetting everyone!"

Her guests had, in fact, clearly decided to help with the confusion. The watcher in the hall was surrounded by three officers of the 44th, led by Kit Grantham, while others good-naturedly blocked access to the stairs.

"No, no," Kit was blustering. "I demand to know under what authority you dare to disrupt my friends' home! Miss Muir is my future wife and I will not have her..."

Somehow, through the heaving confusion in the hall, a small gap had opened up, and through it, Gillie met the gaze of Lord Wickenden, who leaned negligently against the newel post at the foot of the main stairs.

But Harry, clearly no respecter of persons, began to barge his way through the obstacles in his path and Gillie hurried after him. "Do you imagine I keep smugglers under my dining table?" she demanded.

"No, but you have servants' quarters and attics, don't you?" Harry retorted.

"Free of smugglers as a rule," Gillie muttered.

Harry, meanwhile, had come face-to-face with Lord Wickenden, who stood right in his path. Clearly unafraid of "Quality", Harry met the baron's disdainful stare, even raised his arm to push him aside. And yet for some reason, his arm fell again.

"Miss Muir," Wickenden drawled. "Should I let this fellow pass or toss him out on his ear? My advice is the latter."

"By all means let him pass," Gillie said. "He is, as it were, digging his own grave. It is all matter for the letters his superiors will receive as to his conduct."

Wickenden stood aside. "Then by all means, dig," he said pleasantly to Harry. "We shall take notes."

Muttering something indistinguishable—to Gillie at least, Harry barged past. Gillie followed on his heels. She glanced back across the hall once, to see Bernard and Joshua emerge from the cellar stairs. They appeared to be arguing.

“Joshua!” Harry called. “Anything?”

“No, sir. A couple of dodgy-looking barrels –.”

“They’re just old,” Bernard said impatiently. “A man can have an old barrel in his cellar, I suppose?”

“Up here, Joshua,” Harry commanded. “Go back to your party,” he snarled over his shoulder at the guests. Ignoring him, Wickenden walked silently behind Gillie. Harry glared at her. “There is no need for you to accompany me.”

“There is every need! This is my house you are invading on some presumably malicious misinformation! Who told you Jack Sugden was here?”

Harry didn’t answer. At the top of the stairs, he barged into the parlor and the little dining room, opening every cupboard door. Joshua went up the next flight of stairs with Bernard daring him to make the slightest mess of any of the bedchambers, while Harry marched purposefully on the door at the end of the first floor.

“You can’t go in there!” Gillie objected. “My stepmother is *en travail*!”

“So you said, ma’am,” Harry returned grimly.

Gillie allowed his instincts to be only too right. She only hoped hers were, too. If he opened that door, if Jack stood in the middle of the room being yelled at by Isabella...

With the most perfunctory of knocks, Harry wrenched at the handle. Unexpectedly, Wickenden’s hand closed over his. Harry tried and failed to wrench it free, glaring at the baron. “Get your—”

“Allow the lady to go first, for God’s sake, and make sure all is decent. What are you thinking of?”

Harry flushed and actually stood back, leaving Wickenden in possession of the handle. He pushed open the door and stood aside for Gillie.

“Isabella,” Gillie said, hurrying inside, her eyes darting. Jack was nowhere to be seen, only Dulcie holding the hand of her panting patient. “I am so sorry, dear, but this man from the Watch insists you’re hiding a smuggler in here.”

Harry had barged in right behind her and stopped dead, staring at the unmistakably genuine scene before him.

“Smuggler!” Isabella uttered, heaving herself forward on her pillows. “*Smuggler?*” She hurled a cushion at Harry, erupting into a torrent of Spanish before breaking off and falling back with a scream of agony.

“Get out of here, Harry Moore, you imbecile!” Dulcie hissed, From nowhere, it seemed, she seized a broom and came at him with it. “Your father would turn in his grave, but so help me your mother will hear about this outrage! Out! Out!”

Harry fled, knocking into Lord Wickenden who lounged against the doorpost, his back to the room.

“So sorry, Isabella,” Gillie muttered.

The valence moved and Jack’s head appeared from underneath it. At the same time, Eliza Sugden revealed herself inside the wardrobe. Gillie shooed them back into hiding with a wave of both hands and hurried to the door.

“Nicely done,” Wickenden breathed.

“How much did you see?” Gillie whispered in suspicion, closing the door behind her.

“Nothing, of course.”

Harry was charging up to the servants’ rooms from which, Gillie had to hope, Eliza had removed all traces of her husband.

“He’ll turn them upside down in frustration,” Gillie said ruefully.

“You should have let me throw him out.”

“Well, this way they’ll see the report as false and leave us alone. On that head, at least.”

“Who made the complaint?”

“They won’t say.”

“It wasn’t I, for what that’s worth.”

“I know.”

“Do you?” He stood too close to her, all but hemming her in at the doorway, and she refused to show weakness by sliding away along the wall. “Then you don’t imagine I am seeking revenge for your humiliating jilting of *me* for the penniless young officer?”

“I didn’t jilt you,” Gillie said calmly. “You never made me an offer of any kind. I never expected you to. If you did, it would not have been one I could accept.”

“You mean a *carte blanche*?” he said outrageously. “But you know, you’d have a lot more fun as my mistress than as Kit Grantham’s wife.”

Her shock was only fleeting. It seemed she understood him too well. “You are trying to provoke me,” she said calmly.

“On the contrary,” he said lazily, stretching out one hand to tip up her chin with one finger and then letting it slide down her throat. She steeled herself not to shiver, pretended to ignore his touch. “I might be trying to seduce you.”

His finger did not stop at the base of her throat although it lingered there an instant over her racing pulse before slipping further downward between her breasts to the neckline of her gown. It felt like

a trail of fire, heating her whole body.

"You might be," she managed. "But I know you aren't."

"What makes you think that?" he asked, as though interested, while his finger caressed, slid inside the neckline of her gown.

Breaking her paralysis at last, she seized his wrist. "Because it wasn't Mrs. Derwent's instruction."

"I haven't followed anyone's instruction in nearly ten years." Using her grip on his wrist, he pulled her closer and bent his head unhurriedly, closing his mouth over hers.

She gasped because her every desire was to surrender to his kiss, to lose herself in the sweet, sensual daze. And none of it was real, not for him. Her loss surged upward like a tide and her eyes, her throat, ached with tears desperate to spill.

She jerked her lips free. "I will never be your mistress," she said shakily. "And I *will* marry Captain Grantham."

He regarded her, his eyes, still so close, searching her face. "For the first, I haven't asked you. For the second, of course you won't. You're only doing it to spite Lillian Derwent, and you wouldn't ruin two lives for spite."

She stared at him, stunned that he had seen through everything. Only vaguely did she register the footsteps climbing the stairs from below.

"Gillie?" said Kit's voice. "Are you up here?"

"Yes," Gillie said, breaking away from Wickenden. She pushed past him, hurrying along the hall to the staircase. But it seemed the wicked baron had stopped playing discreetly. He strolled after her.

"Is all well?" Kit asked anxiously, his gaze flickering from Gillie at the top of the stairs, to Wickenden, and widening.

"Of course. They've found nothing. They're tearing the servants' rooms apart now, and then they will *have* to go away. Leave them be, my lord, you have done enough. I'm going back to my guests."

Irritatingly, Kit offered her his arm. She took it. Beneath her fingers, he felt rigid and her heart sank all over again. She wasn't sure she could bear another lecture on propriety, not on top of everything else. But unusually, Kit was silent. Perhaps he was inhibited by the leisurely step of the baron behind them.

Downstairs, Doctor Morton had just arrived with Mattie and Danny.

"Oh thank goodness," Gillie said, hurrying across to meet them. "I'm so glad you came, Doctor! Mattie, will you show him to Mrs. Isabella's chamber? Danny, the Watch is rifling the servants' quarters. Perhaps you'd keep an eye on them?"

"Damned rats!" Danny exclaimed, charging at once for the stairs. "They just waited for me to leave so you'd get no warning!"

“There, I remember the way,” Doctor Morton said, steering Mattie back toward Gillie. “I think you should look after your mistress.”

There was nothing for Gillie to do but walk as regally as she could into the salon. She just hoped no one would notice that her limbs trembled and her whole face ached with unshed tears.

Chapter Twelve

WICKENDEN WAS CONSCIOUS of a rare prickle of guilt as he walked into the salon behind Gillie and Kit Grantham. He hadn't meant to upset her. Merely, he'd taken the opportunity to prove to himself that he was right about the reasons for her sudden engagement to Kit, and to prove to her that he didn't believe in it. He hadn't really stopped to think of his intentions beyond that, just to end the charade. Her trembling lips had proved to him where her heart lay, and yet her distress made him feel like a cad.

Well, aren't you? a pernicious voice whispered in his head. *What are your intentions toward a gently born young lady who sets your blood on fire?*

But God help him, it was more than lust. He wanted to protect her, laugh with her, walk with her...

Sensing the ultimate danger in such thoughts, he veered away, mentally and physically. Leaving Gillie and Kit talking to the elder Miss Muir, he strolled through to the smaller salon and poured himself a glass of the excellent brandy. He even raised his glass to the absent Jack, presumably still beneath the bed of an angry Spanish woman in labor.

Laughter caught in his throat. Life around Gillie was never dull.

"My lord, might I have a word?"

Wickenden blinked at the speaker who seemed to have materialized in front of him. Kit Grantham, looking stern and serious.

Wickenden sighed. "Of course."

"It's about Gillie. Miss Muir."

"Indeed?" He didn't want to have this conversation here. Or at all, really, but certainly not in her home, in public. He therefore made his expression discouragingly haughty. "I'm not sure it should be."

Kit flushed and stepped closer. "My lord, I am aware of the agreement between you and my mother. I know you were acting on her instruction—"

Wickenden poured another glass of brandy and pushed it into Kit's hands. "My good captain, I have done nothing whatsoever on your mother's instructions."

"On her plea, then," Kit corrected impatiently.

Wickenden sipped his brandy. "Not even that. I am, alas, much too selfish. And do you know, I do not care for the tone of this

discussion?"

To the credit of his courage, if not his intelligence, Kit would not back down. "I must ask you, my lord, not to distress Miss Muir by calling here."

Wickenden sighed. "You are not in the position of choosing Miss Muir's guests," he pointed out.

"I am betrothed to her," Kit said sternly.

Wickenden continued to gaze at him until he flushed and dropped his eyes, clearly aware that Wickenden knew the betrothal was false. Kit looked at his brandy glass in surprise, as if he'd forgotten it was there, and raised it to his lips.

"You're a good friend to her," Wickenden allowed quietly. "But you'd be a better one if you persuaded her to end this farce now."

Kit lowered his glass, narrowing his gaze in temper. "My engagement is not your concern."

"Very true," Wickenden said and with the slightest of bows and would have passed on, only Kit actually caught his arm.

"Sir!" Kit said desperately.

Wickenden gazed significantly at Kit's hand on his sleeve until the younger man hurriedly dropped it.

"Sir, I *will* speak," Kit said urgently. "You must not come here again."

Wickenden had had enough. "Or what?" he asked flatly.

Kit floundered. "Or I will be forced to take steps!"

"Such as?" Wickenden asked without much interest.

"Such as calling you out," Kit blurted.

"Lower your voice, you imbecile. There will be no duel associated with her name."

"I have any number of reasons to call you out!"

"Oh stop it," Wickenden said tiredly.

"Then you are afraid to fight me?" Kit pounced.

Wickenden stared at him. "Terrified."

Kit's flush deepened. "You hold me in contempt, I gather."

"I'm not going to fight you," Wickenden said irritably. "Not today and not tomorrow. Read into that fear or contempt or whatever you will. Excuse me."

Maybe Wickenden, in his distraction, handled him badly. Or maybe Kit was too desperate to prove himself Gillie's protector, especially against the man he must suspect she cared something for. Whatever the reason, Wickenden caught the change of expression a tiny instant before Kit moved.

Wickenden's hand shot out, seizing Captain Grantham's wrist. The brandy slopped up the side of Kit's glass, a few drops trickled over the top and rolled down the side. Kit withstood his gaze defiantly.

“Really?” Wickenden said softly. “Here, in her home, with the Watch on the premises?”

Kit flushed, trying to jerk free. But Wickenden wasn’t finished. “Very well, my seconds will call on you, but if you breathe a word of this to anyone else, I’ll kill you where you stand.” He smiled for the benefit of anyone who might be watching, as if this was all horse play, then released Kit’s wrist and strolled away into the larger salon.

Everyone was settling down to some more play, amidst a lot of talk, low-voiced and otherwise. This was why ladies would never attend these gatherings – save for the elderly whist fiends with the elder Miss Muir. Nobody wanted the Watch blundering in, searching for smugglers or trying to clear the house. It was a brave venture. Bernard alone could have got away with it perhaps, but not with Gillie under the same roof.

And when had he started thinking like a damned chaperone? He wasn’t her father, or her brother, let alone her husband. It was none of his damned business. He should walk away. But even then, he knew he wouldn’t.

Bernard strode into the salon, throwing his hands high in triumph. “They’ve gone!” he exclaimed, to a resounding cheer.

Through it, Wickenden glimpsed Gillie speaking softly to the maid, who set aside her tray of glasses and hurried from the room – presumably to extract Jack from under the Spanish lady’s bed.

The thought made him smile, not just at the ridiculousness of the situation, but that despite everything, Gillie had taken the woman in anyway. She really was a rare and rather wonderful creature.

*

ISABELLA’S SON WAS born just before dawn. Although Dulcie and Mrs. Jack had shooed her from the room some time before, Gillie could no more have slept than the mother herself. Instead, she paced up and down the hallway, upstairs to her own chamber and back down again, until finally, from the landing outside her door, she heard the cry of a baby. She all but flew downstairs and burst into Isabella’s bedchamber.

Isabella sat up in the big bed, supported by pillows, her hair somewhat lank but brushed back from her exhausted face. And yet somehow, she was beautiful. The soft light in her dark eyes, the tender smile on her lips as she gazed down at the wrapped baby in her arms, made her so.

“Oh, Isabella,” Gillie said, wonder in her cracked voice as she moved toward her.

Isabella glanced up and smiled at her. “Come and see him.”

Gillie sat on the bed, reaching out one finger to draw down a corner of the shawl to give her a better view. Eyes tight shut, it was a perfect, tiny, miraculous little human.

Gillie touched his soft, warm cheek. "My little brother," she whispered. At that moment, she didn't care whether or not he actually was. He always would be to her.

With a sudden movement, Isabella seized her in one arm and hugged her, gasping out a few incoherent words in Spanish, from which Gillie could make out only, "Thank you."

Gillie hugged her back, letting the tears flow, until the baby, objecting perhaps to sharing his mother, woke up and cried. They parted, laughing in kind of watery way, and Gillie watched with wonder as Isabella fed her baby.

It was light before Gillie left Isabella and the baby to go to bed. Hushed voices from the hall below distracted her. Thinking that Bernard must be desperate to know about the birth, she hurried downstairs to discover her brother deep in a low-toned conversation with Kit Grantham.

It was the second time she'd discovered the two in such a huddle since last night and it made her suspicious. She hoped Kit wasn't roping Bernie into some scheme to persuade her to marry him in reality.

Catching sight of her, they broke off.

"Good morning," Kit called across the hall, then bowed and hastily departed. Bernard, it seemed, couldn't wait to close the door on him.

"What was all that about?" Gillie demanded.

"Oh, nothing really. Fellow's got himself into a bit of bother and needs my advice."

Gillie blinked. "Bernie, you know I love you, but why would a man of Captain Grantham's experience need the advice of someone only just turned twenty-one who's never travelled further than Carlisle?"

"It's not that kind of advice," Bernard insisted with more haste than dignity. "It's to do with cards."

"Oh," Gillie said, not believing him for a moment.

"I'll be going up to the castle later, look in on Lord Braithwaite, you know."

"Very well." When she was less tired, she would understand why all this was bothering her. "Isabella's baby is born. He's beautiful."

"I thought I heard a cry! But I've been dozing all night and wasn't sure if I was dreaming. Does he have a name yet?"

"Arthur."

Bernard lifted his eyebrows. "Father's name," he observed. "It's either very clever or... Do you know what I think, Gillie?"

"That she is his wife and the child is our brother?"

He nodded glumly.

"It will be all right now, Bernie. She stood by us, hiding Jack without a murmur, even yelling as if she were in agony when she wasn't at all. She doesn't like what we do, but I believe she really does like us."

"And you like her. But then, you like everyone. I suppose I can't go and see the brat right now?"

"They're asleep. Later would be best."

"You should be asleep too," Bernard observed, strolling past her with a yawn. "It's been a busy night."

"It has," Gillie agreed.

GILLIE WAS FAR too excited to sleep very well, especially with the sun fighting its way through her bed chamber curtains. Her thoughts were full of Isabella and the baby and the wonder of motherhood, of Lord Wickenden and the way he'd kissed her despite her supposed engagement to Kit, and of Bernard, huddling with Kit and announcing his proposed visit to the castle almost immediately after. Something was going on.

It was still only late morning when she rose once more, washed and dressed. She discovered her aunt in Isabella's chamber, making little gooey noises to the sleeping baby in the cradle beside the bed. Isabella slept, too.

Together, Gillie and Aunt Margaret crept from the room. "They're both doing well," Aunt Margaret said with satisfaction. "So nice to have a little baby about the place again... Have you broken your fast, Gillie?"

"Why, no, I've only just risen. I couldn't sleep last night until the baby was born."

"Go and eat. I think Bernard's just sent for ham and toast."

"Bernard is up?" Gillie said in amazement.

"Apparently so,"

He was indeed up and eating a hearty breakfast, preparatory, he said, to walking up to the castle.

"Do you know," Gillie said on impulse, "I think I'll walk up with you."

Bernard, who was open by nature, immediately looked alarmed. "Probably not such a great idea," he said hastily. "Braithwaite won't receive you in his bedchamber, you know! And Serena left with Lady Frances."

"I know," Gillie said. "I shall pay my respects to Lady Braithwaite."

Bernard leapt to his feet. "Yes, but I'm going now. If you wait until this afternoon, I'll borrow Higson's trap and drive you up—"

"No, I'd like the walk," Gillie insisted, cramming a last piece of

toast in her mouth. "Just let me grab my shawl and we'll go."

*

LADY BRAITHWAITE WAS surprised but apparently not displeased to receive Gillie.

"It's quite lonely, you know, only Braithwaite and me rattling about in this great, old place! I almost wish I'd let Frances and Serena stay as they wished."

"Bernard tells me Lord Braithwaite is bearing up," Gillie offered.

"If you mean he's already confoundedly bored, then yes," the countess said ruefully. "So bored he has people he barely knows closeted with him for hours."

"Oh? I didn't know he had visitors already. Bernard behaved as if his visit was necessary to his lordship's sanity!"

Lady Braithwaite allowed herself a small smile. "Bernard has always been good company, but he's a little young for Braithwaite's set. Let alone Wickenden's."

Although she was prepared for his name – or even his person – Gillie couldn't help the inevitable twinge of her heart.

"I believe Lord Wickenden is something of a sporting hero to Bernard," she managed calmly.

Lady Braithwaite turned her penetrating gaze upon Gillie. "No doubt. And he is a gentleman of the *haute tonne*. He seemed quite taken with you, Gillie. And yet I hear you have engaged yourself at last to Captain Grantham."

Trying to ignore the heat flooding her face, Gillie stuck with the statement before last so that she wouldn't need to lie. "I'm sure he just felt sorry for me."

"He does have a good heart although he hides it well. Captain Grantham is an adequate match, however. He has no fortune of his own, but his mother has married into the Derwents, who will, I believe, ensure his promotion. Will you follow the drum, Gillie? I can imagine you adventuring in Spain!"

"I haven't decided yet," Gillie blurted in agony. "But speaking of Spain, I have acquired a new brother! My stepmother was delivered of a boy."

"Your stepmother? You are acknowledging that woman now?"

"I cannot be certain, of course, but I've come to believe she really did marry my father."

The countess nodded. "Featherstone thought it was likely. He said he and your man had only bought you some time. What will Bernard, do?"

"I don't know," Gillie confessed. "She disagrees with us about the

card parties.”

“I disagree with you about the card parties,” Lady Braithwaite said dryly. “But I daresay Captain Grantham will put a stop to them. I shall speak to him today, when he leaves Braithwaite.”

Gillie felt her eyes widen. “Kit – Captain Grantham – is with Lord Braithwaite just now?”

“Yes, and Major Randolph.”

“And Bernard... Something is going on.”

“Let us ask Wickenden. That sounds like his tread in the hall.”

Gillie did her best to steel herself as Lady Braithwaite called his name. A moment later, Lord Wickenden strolled into the room. He bowed to his hostess then came to shake hands with her. She slid her fingers free as soon as she could.

“What news from the battlefield?” he asked ironically.

“If you mean the lying-in, I have a baby brother and both he and his mother are doing well.”

“Excellent. I believe Colonel Fredericks will be taking care of your other problem.”

Before she could inquire which problem, Lady Braithwaite distracted him. “What is going on in my son’s bedchamber, Wickenden?”

Wickenden’s lips twitched. “I could not possibly say, ma’am.”

“He’s got Bernard Muir, Major Randolph, and Captain Grantham in there.”

Gillie thought she caught a flicker of surprise at this last name, although with Wickenden it was hard to tell.

“Go and find out for us what they’re up to,” Lady Braithwaite commanded.

“I fear I would not be welcome, ma’am. Local business.”

Lady Braithwaite’s shrewd eyes lingered on his face. “You know what it’s all about but you’re not telling.”

Wickenden clutched his heart. “Allow a man to keep some honor. Alas, I am pledged to secrecy!”

“Hmph,” uttered the countess.

Wickenden smiled reassuringly. “I wouldn’t concern yourself. It is nothing of moment or of interest to any but males of the species. Braithwaite merely amuses himself until he’s fit enough to go out and about again.”

It was plausible enough in a secretive, slightly silly kind of way that Gillie did not associate with Lord Wickenden. Only it made Gillie even less easy. Memories flashed in and out of her mind, particularly Kit’s face when he’d seen Lord Wickenden follow her out of the darkness of the passage last night. And he’d strode purposefully into the smaller salon, only to emerge white-faced and tense a moment

later. Bernard and Kit in close and somewhat secret confabulation last night and again early this morning. Bernard's efforts to put her off coming here...not to stop her encountering Lord Wickenden, for he'd offered to bring her this afternoon. He simply hadn't wanted her here *now*. And it seemed Wickenden wasn't waited in the discussions either.

Understanding struggled. It was, surely, *about* Wickenden. Braithwaite was surely the baron's only friend in Blackhaven now that the London guests had left. But Bernard, Braithwaite, and Randolph all knew each other exceedingly well.

No.

She stared at Wickenden, who gazed unblinkingly back at her, a faint smile on his lips that told her nothing.

She jumped to her feet. "I must go. Thank you, Lady Braithwaite. Please give my best regards to his lordship for his speedy recovery."

"Why don't you wait for Bernard?" Lady Braithwaite asked in surprise.

"Oh, who knows how long he'll be," Gillie babbled. "I should get back to Isabella. So glad to talk to you, though..."

Wickenden, who'd risen with her, accompanied her to the door.

"You wouldn't, would you?" she said intensely.

"Wouldn't what?" he asked, opening the door for her.

Forcing herself, she met his gaze. "Fight a duel in Blackhaven."

He didn't even blink. "Why would I even consider anything so foolish."

"That isn't an answer!"

"Yes," he said, "it is. Wait. If you won't wait for Bernard, let me drive you back to the village."

"That won't be necessary."

"Yes, it will. The spies are not yet in custody, according to Colonel Fredericks. You can't walk alone."

She pushed past him. "I would rather face fifty spies than be in your company a moment longer," she said intensely.

Fortunately, in the courtyard, she encountered Bernard, Kit, and Major Randolph, emerging from the door to the family's private quarters in deep, serious conversation.

She glanced back and saw Lord Wickenden still standing on the main front steps. He didn't walk down to meet the others, as would have been natural. Instead, seeing her with them, he simply turned his back and walked back inside.

Chapter Thirteen

SHE SEIZED BERNARD as soon as they entered the house, dragging him into the empty salon.

"Is Kit fighting a duel with Lord Wickenden?" she demanded.

"Don't be ridiculous," Bernard muttered, shrugging her off impatiently.

"I'm not, but they are! And so are you if you're encouraging the folly!"

"Of course I'm not encouraging it!" Bernard exclaimed, then, floundering, "That is, if it were happening, of course I wouldn't encourage it."

"Your Kit's second, aren't you?"

"Dash it, Gillie!"

"I'll take that as yes. You and Major Randolph. And Lord Braithwaite is acting for Wickenden. Only why was Kit there? Shouldn't it all be arranged by the seconds?"

Bernard dragged one hand through his already rumpled hair and gave in. "Braithwaite wanted him there to talk some sense into him. Didn't trust me or Randolph to do it."

"And did he succeed?" Gillie asked eagerly. "All of you together?"

"Hardly, when it isn't happening!" Bernard exclaimed with a last ditch attempt to save the secrecy of the situation. "Don't be a ninny, Gillie."

Of course, it was not Bernard's secret to reveal, and she recognized the unkindness in pressing him further. Instead, she went to the parlor and wrote a note to Kit, asking him to call at his earliest convenience. After which, she busied herself with duties around the house, and visited Isabella and her son, a pleasure from which she was distracted by Charles announcing the arrival of Kit.

Although Aunt Margaret was not best pleased with her apparent betrothal to Kit, she was too good-natured to say a word against it. She was quite happy to concentrate on her needlework while Kit and Gillie sat in the window seat at the other side of the room.

"I'm very glad you sent for me," he said, smiling.

"Well, I don't know that you're going remain happy," she said frankly. "I want to talk you out of something,"

His smile faded. "Our engagement."

"Don't be silly, Kit, there is no engagement, is there? I know you

won't even admit to me that you're doing this, but I want you to stop it."

"Stop what?"

"This duel you're apparently not having with Lord Wickenden."

"I have never been involved in an affair of honor," Kit said, carefully clinging to the letter of truth.

"No, and I don't want you to be, because Lord Wickenden has! Several."

"I am aware of it. And I know he has killed his man once, if not twice by now."

"Then...if you were to fight him and die, you would die happy knowing that some honor is satisfied?"

"Of course," he said. "If I were to fight him."

"And do you think your mother would understand that honor and applaud you? Do you think your friends would? That I would? Even I know that dueling is forbidden in the regiment."

"It's forbidden, but it happens anyway because yes, officers do understand affairs of honor."

"I suppose you'd be doing them a favor by dying!"

"Now you're being ridiculous. You're assuming I would lose...were I to fight him."

"Everyone else has lost," she pointed out.

"But they were not soldiers," Kit said proudly.

She leaned forward. "Kit, you do know that *he* was a soldier? He fought in India and—"

"I don't care," Kit interrupted, though she could see that his complacent bubble, no doubt bolstering his courage, was burst. "And I wouldn't, even if I were to fight him. May we talk of something else?"

"No, we may not. Not until you have rediscovered your sense. For there is no purpose in this! If you imagine you are quarrelling over me, there is no need. He has never behaved other than as a perfect gentleman in my company." This was not, of course, strictly true, but she had faith God would forgive the white lie in a good cause.

"His presence distresses you," Kit said flatly. "I will not allow that."

Until those words, Gillie hadn't even been sure that Kit had been the challenger. For some reason it was a relief to discover her instinctive hope was truth.

"It is not your place," she reminded him, "to allow or disallow anything. You keep forgetting our engagement is a sham."

"To spite my mother?" Kit countered. "Or to keep *him* at bay?"

"That does not matter," she said, brushing it aside. "It will be over soon enough. Don't go through with this, Kit, not for *nothing*."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said grandly.

She jumped to her feet. "Then go. I have nothing more to say to you."

Kit obeyed, with unseemly relief, barely remembering to take his leave of Aunt Margaret in his rush to get out of the door.

"Why are men such *idiots*?" Gillie demanded.

"I suppose they are born that way," Aunt Margaret said comfortably.

"Why would a man do battle for his country, even come home to seek medical attention for his wound and then throw all that away on a—" She broke off, biting her lip before the rest of her frustration could spill out in words she'd regret.

Still, she would not give up. Sitting down once more at the escritoire, she penned yet another note, this time to Major Randolph, who was one of the most sensible men she'd ever met.

She rang for Charles and bade him take the missive round to the barracks. She watched out of the window as he and Danny loped up the street together. Against the tree opposite, a familiar, scruffy young man leaned against a tree, nibbling at the remains of an apple.

"You again," she murmured, frowning. The watcher followed Charles and Danny with his eyes, even eased himself off the tree to see which way they turned at the end of the road. But he didn't leave his post.

A carriage turned into the crescent from the other end of the street and slowed to a stop directly below Gillie. Colonel Fredericks was helped down the steps and wheezed up to the front door, closely followed by his manservant. Only then did Gillie remember Lord Wickenden's remarks about the colonel coming to remove her "other problem".

"I believe Colonel Fredericks is on his way up," she told her aunt, who brightened perceptibly and put away her work.

"Ring for tea, Gillie."

"I shall. And I'll just go and take his arm up the stairs," In truth, of course, Gillie wished to catch him before he came upstairs. It wouldn't otherwise be so easy to speak confidentially to him – he, too was a little deaf and wherever she sat in the parlor, Gillie would be obliged to speak so loudly that her aunt would hear every word about spies and abductions and smugglers, and worry herself to an early grave.

Gillie ran down in time to meet him waddling across the hall toward the stairs. Hastily, she took his arm and turned him into the salon, currently cleared of card tables and other signs of festivities.

Closing the door, she bade him sit in the first arm chair.

"So," he said, sighing as he sank into the cushions. "I hadn't realized you have Jack Sugden and his entire family in hiding here!"

"Actually, it's a pleasure to have his family. Eliza is particularly

useful, besides. But I don't believe he's safe. Someone told the Watch he was here and I can't help thinking that must be one of the spies so desperate to get at either him or our cellars! Or both."

"So Lord Wickenden explained to me. I'll have the Watch called off, but you're right, he can't stay here. We're just about ready to arrest the spies, just waiting for the last to turn up, and then I'll need to smuggle Jack to Carlisle to make his statement to the magistrate. After that, he should be safe to return to Blackhaven. But I can certainly take him off your hands just now. He can hide with me until our plan moves forward."

"That's the thing, I'm not sure he can," Gillie said anxiously. "Someone is watching the house and following me, presumably also other members of the household. He's across the street right now and he'd see you take Jack, however you disguised him."

The colonel frowned. "Hmmm."

"Danny could bring him out the back way when it's dark," Gillie suggested. "And then smuggle him to your house?"

The colonel's eyes sparkled. "Via your secret tunnel?" he inquired.

"Sadly, it's no longer so secret," Gillie confessed. "It was discovered from the other side and we've had to block off the cellars." All but the one secret room where the smuggled brandy currently resided. The Watch hadn't found it last night, even while searching for Jack's hiding place. "But Danny is quite skilled in dodging observation."

"I imagine he and Jack both are!" Colonel Fredericks said dryly. "Providing Jack's fit, of course?"

"He's still pretty weak, and the doctor says his wound could open again if he puts any strain on it, but he's definitely on the mend. A gentle stroll in the dark should do him no harm. Providing they don't have to run for their lives!"

"Let's hope not." The colonel heaved himself to his feet. "Now, my dear, take me to your esteemed aunt. I would love to take a cup of tea with her."

*

BY THE TIME Major Randolph called, they were just about to sit down to dinner and Gillie was beginning to feel her sleepless night had caught up with her. She had just been sitting with Isabella, holding the fractious baby while his mother had a chance to eat.

"Then it will be your turn, impatient, greedy little boy," Gillie told him, rocking him against her shoulder.

Mattie appeared with the news of Major Randolph's arrival and Gillie delivered the child up to her.

"I'm supposed to be serving dinner," Mattie said nervously.

"Dinner will have to wait ten minutes. Just rock him and he won't cry. Much."

Leaving Isabella watching sardonically over her fork, Gillie hurried off to the parlor.

"Major!" Gillie greeted her latest caller, who stood before her aunt enunciating carefully loud and labored conversation. "I'm so glad you found the time to call today. There is something I particularly wish to say to you." Taking his arm in familiar fashion, she led him to the same window seat she'd earlier occupied with Kit. The end of his *tête à tête* with Aunt Margaret seemed to be a relief to both of them. "She really isn't quite that deaf," Gillie murmured.

Randolph didn't smother his grin, which told her, surprisingly, that he was well aware of it. Amusing himself at an elderly lady's expense was not a trait she'd ever expected of him. But there, no doubt she was mistaken.

"Major, I know you will deny any knowledge of such a thing, but it has come to my attention that Kit and Lord Wickenden are going to fight a duel."

He gazed at her unblinkingly for a moment before he shrugged. "Then there is no point in keeping it from you."

Thank God for a sensible man. "Good. When is it supposed to take place?"

"The morning after tomorrow, but for your own good, I shall not tell you where."

"It is silly, reasonless and will achieve nothing!"

"I entirely agree," Major Randolph said, surprisingly. "It is a great waste of time and probably life, and say what they will, I cannot see any way for your name not to be dragged into it."

Gillie brushed the last aside as of no consequence. "It is the waste of life that concerns me. The duel must not be allowed to happen. And yet I cannot persuade either Bernard or Kit himself to stop it."

"He couldn't in honor back away from Wickenden," Randolph explained. "Everyone would say he was afraid."

If he had any sense he *would* be afraid! "Then is there no hope of turning Lord Wickenden from this course?"

"I cannot see how. Kit tried to throw a glass of brandy in his face."

"Tried?" Gillie pounced. "Only tried?"

"Well, yes, Wickenden stopped him before the whole room saw the scandal – to say nothing of the Watch."

"Then he does not really wish to fight?" Gillie said eagerly.

"I don't believe he does," Randolph said with another shrug. "But the challenge was made. He can't back out unless Kit apologizes. Which he won't."

“Couldn’t Wickenden apologize?”

“And admit that he was in the wrong—that he behaved ill with you? I don’t believe he would ever do that. He knows as well as I do that the motives behind the duel will always out. People love a scandal too much. I don’t like the man, but I allow that in his favor. Though I am his second, I acknowledge Kit is in the wrong here.”

“This is ridiculous,” Gillie fumed. “Can’t we *make* Kit apologize?”

“Bernard and I – and Lord Braithwaite himself – have spent hours trying to do just that. But nothing will make him budge, not even the damage to your reputation which he imagines won’t matter when you’re married.”

Gillie opened her mouth to deny that they would ever be married, and then closed it again to think. “He really does want to marry me, doesn’t he?”

“He always has. Even before he went to Spain.”

“He never told me,” Gillie said curiously.

“He told everyone else who’d listen. Including your father which is, no doubt, why he was hauled off to Spain.”

Gillie let that one pass. “I could agree to marry him if he apologizes and calls off the duel.”

“You’ve already agreed to marry him,” Randolph said dryly.

Gillie sighed. “I suppose I have...”

Her breath caught. *Elope*. She almost laughed, then shook her head. “No. No, that would not answer at all,”

“What wouldn’t?” Randolph asked curiously—and just a little uneasily. “Tell me!”

“No, for I have already discarded it. But there may be a useful idea in there.” Marriage as bait, to persuade Kit to apologize... “I’m glad I know now that you’re all against this duel, too, and will support him if I can bring him to cry off.”

“I wish you all joy with that,” Randolph said seriously.

Elope. The idea presented itself again, only more intensely. And truly, it wasn’t such a terrible notion if she clipped its wings. She only needed to *offer* to elope, perhaps tomorrow night – the night before the duel. Otherwise, she’d call off the engagement all together.

Of course, Kit was too straight-laced to elope in normal circumstances, but she could force his hand somehow. The important thing was to get him away from Blackhaven the morning of the duel.

She had no intention of going through with the marriage, of course, so she had to think of a way, for her family’s sake, to save her reputation... First things first.

“What would happen,” she asked, “if Kit simply didn’t turn up on the morning of the duel?”

Randolph shrugged. “Bernard and I would apologize on his behalf

and Wickenden would be satisfied. His absence would be taken as an admission of guilt. Which would be best for you if the matter ever leaked out."

Her sudden absence from Blackhaven might cause a whisper of scandal, of course, but surely no more than a duel being fought over her. She could pretend some sick relative or something...

Gradually, she became aware that Major Randolph was watching her a little too closely.

"What are you up to, Gillie? You're not planning on kidnapping poor Kit are you? Having Danny lock him in the cellar?"

"It crossed my mind," she confessed. "But I was forced to discard the notion. He would make such a racket and sound does carry from there into the house. Someone would be sure to let him out. And besides, I have to think of the baby now, too." Gillie smiled brightly. "But you have given me much food for thought! I knew I liked you for a reason, Major! I am sure I'll come up with a solution and make sure this stupid duel never happens."

*

LORD WICKENDEN STROLLED into Carlisle's most favored posting inn and made his way to the busy taproom, where he sat down and ordered ale. He received a few curious looks, since Quality tended to favor private parlors, but lone gentlemen were hardly so rare there as to cause comment.

Wickenden stretched his long legs out in front of him and sipped his ale.

Eventually, an unsavory individual took the other seat at his table. "Evening."

Wickenden nodded amiably.

"He's been around most of the ports, looking for passage," the man said, raising his tankard. "Took fright, so far as I can tell, when they all wanted papers."

"He needs someone above suspicion to travel with," Wickenden observed. "It's how he got in to the country. I suppose he'll come to the conclusion it's his only way out and return. Where is he now?"

"Supposedly here in Carlisle, but I've seen no sign of him. Or his smuggling friends. They're lying low."

"Oh, we know where they are. Well, send me word if you come across our friend, but I suspect he's more likely now to come to me." He took a hearty swallow of ale. "I'll send for you, George. Well done."

"Thank you, sir," George said without moving as Wickenden stood up and strolled away. He really was an excellent servant, always

grasped exactly what was required of him.

Chapter Fourteen

GILLIE'S FIRST BUSINESS of Thursday morning was to summon Captain Grantham via an urgent note. Smuggler Jack had duly been smuggled himself out of the house the night before, via the kitchen door, and through the vegetable garden to the lane at the back, from where, with Danny's help, he'd easily got to Colonel Fredericks's house.

Gillie had watched anxiously from the parlor window. There had been no sign of "the watcher" and she couldn't help fearing he was now haunting the back of the house, ready to capture Jack. However, the removal had apparently been accomplished without more incident. Gillie now felt free to concentrate on preventing the duel between Kit and Lord Wickenden.

Not for the first time, she railed against stupid conventions that prevented her from simply going to the barracks and asking for him. Instead, she had yet another agonizing wait, knowing full well that Kit would prefer to avoid her until the duel was done. Except, when he did finally arrive, she could see at once that he didn't have a great deal of confidence that he'd actually be alive this time tomorrow.

Aunt Margaret was with Isabella and the baby when he called, and Gillie did not stand on ceremony but simply hauled him into the parlor with her.

"Kit, I have come to a decision."

"About what?" he asked, harassed.

"About marriage. I wish to elope. With you."

He stared at her. "We have no need to elope!"

"It's romantic," she insisted.

"It's ramshackle."

"But only think, Kit, we are almost on the Scottish border here and if we leave tonight, we can be married tomorrow morning."

His white face flushed. "I can't be married tomorrow morning," he said awkwardly. "I have an appointment I cannot break."

"That is a pity, because if I have to wait longer, I might go off the idea of marriage again. All together. At least with you."

He tugged at his hair, pacing toward the window before swinging back to face her. "Gillie, this is ridiculous!"

"Is it? Don't you want to marry me?"

He scowled. "You know I do."

"But your honor is more important."

"You would not like," he muttered, "to be married to a dishonorable—or a dishonored—man."

"I wouldn't be. Kit, your quarrel with Lord Wickenden was over me. What better way to win it than to marry me under his very nose?"

His brow furrowed more deeply than ever, then cleared into a rueful smile. "You wish to spite him."

"Don't you?" she countered.

He sat down, burying his head in his hands. After several moments, he looked up and met her gaze. "Gillie. I don't want you to marry me to spite another man."

"No," she agreed. "I can see that." Which was also when she saw that she would indeed need to go through with this. Anything else would be unforgivably unkind to Kit. And truly, it wouldn't be so bad. She and Kit rubbed along pretty well. They were old friends after all, and it wasn't as if she would ever love anyone else.

Before the pain of loss could grip her once more, she went to him and knelt at his feet to take his hand.

"It wouldn't be for spite, Kit. I won't pretend I love you the way you might wish, but I like you very well and I would like—I *need* to begin a new life with you. I couldn't marry a dead man in an English church after the palaver of banns or anything else, could I? I would far rather marry you alive, tomorrow, in a Scottish one."

Kit stared into her eyes, then dropped his gaze to their joined hands. Slowly, he twisted his hand and grasped her fingers before kissing them once.

"Very well," he said, breathlessly. "Let us elope."

*

KIT LEFT IN high good humor to arrange a post chaise and other necessary matters. Gillie, by contrast, felt suddenly low. Aunt Margaret would be so disappointed in her. Bernard...she wasn't quite sure how Bernard would take it, but he would probably take it out on poor Kit. The straight-laced Isabella would never understand, would probably deny her permission even to visit and see her tiny brother Arthur. She'd miss the fortnightly subscription ball at the new Assembly Rooms. She would never dance again with Lord Wickenden.

Brushing that determinedly aside, she concentrated on the positive. She'd never actually been in Scotland before, although they lived so close to the border. Perhaps Kit would take her to Edinburgh for a brief visit before they returned to Blackhaven. And in a few weeks, she'd go with him to Spain and the new life of adventure she'd always wanted.

Everything she wished to take with her—her mother's locket, a spare day gown, a change of underclothes, toothbrush, and powder—was easily packed into one small carpet bag. She then wrote letters to her aunt, to Bernard and to Isabella, and for safe keeping, put them in the bag too before she hid it at the bottom of her wardrobe. Then she went about her daily duties as normal.

She wanted it to be dark now, so that she could get this over with. She'd feel better once she'd done it, once she was married and had Kit to look after. Truly, she'd feel much better.

*

"HAVEN'T YOU GOT anything better to do?" Colonel Fredericks greeted Wickenden when he rode up to him in the gathering dusk.

Wickenden, in his always beautifully tailored civilian dress, had, at the last moment, buckled on his old army sword. He always travelled with it, perhaps to remind himself he hadn't always been a mere dilettante. Just occasionally, he met with a little adventure where it proved useful. Like now.

He met Colonel Fredericks on a hillside about a mile from the coast, in a wooded area from where they could look down on the ruins of an old shepherd's hut. It gave the illusion of isolation from both the town and the castle. The men who hid there hadn't been stupid enough to light a fire, but there were other signs of their presence—footprints, most notably on the outside, and bags and blankets on the inside, under what was left of the roof.

"Sadly, no," Wickenden confessed, watching Fredericks's men spread out to surround the hut. They weren't men of the 44th, who couldn't be trusted in the circumstances, but a force made up of the local Watch, a couple of excise men, and a few of Fredericks' retired old soldiers. "Our other two birds are heading for Braithwaite Cove from different directions. There's a small vessel visible already, so we need to hurry."

"You became a general, did you, during your few short years in the army?" the colonel retorted.

"No, but I would have done."

Fredericks snorted and gave the signal to advance.

*

AT ONE POINT, as she sat in the parlor with her aunt that evening, waiting for the minutes to tick past with a strange sense of doom, Gillie found herself wondering how she would face this adventure were the man in the chaise to be Lord Wickenden. She would be

beside herself with excitement. She might be anxious, but she would not feel this pain, this emptiness. And yet she couldn't draw back. Only this one act of hers could make everything right...or at least prevent it from getting any worse.

"I think I'll retire early, Aunt Margaret," she said at last.

"Well tomorrow, we will be late again with the card party," Aunt Margaret observed. "And, of course, there is the Assembly Room ball on Saturday, so best sleep while you can!"

Once again, her heart misgave her. Aunt Margaret had been looking forward to the ball. Would she even go at all now?

"I'm sorry to be such a bore," she managed as she hugged her aunt and kissed her cheek.

Aunt Margaret looked slightly surprised but not displeased by this unusual show of affection. "There, get along with you," she said, patting Gillie's cheek. "You are the joy of my life, you and Bernard."

She couldn't have said anything to make Gillie feel worse, but she smiled as brightly as she could and tripped off to her room as though she had nothing remotely dire on her mind.

There, she changed into the calico print gown for travelling and put on her shawl and pelisse. She withdrew the three letters from the carpet bag and placed them on the dressing table where Mattie would see them first thing in the morning. No one would come in here before then. Bernard was out with his friends. All was quiet in Isabella's room.

When she heard the tread of the servants heading upstairs to bed, she rose, picked up the carpet bag, and quietly left her bedchamber. She'd lived here all her life. She knew where to place her feet to avoid creaking stairs and floor boards. Silently, she glided downstairs to the hall and into the kitchen. She unbolted the back door as quietly as she could and stepped out into the darkness, hoping Danny would see the door unbolted when he came back with Bernard and remedy the oversight. After all, there had been no word yet from Colonel Fredericks that the spies had been captured. What if they chose this one night to come looking for Jack or his letter?

No, they must have given up. Apart from the watcher, there had been no sign of them for days now.

Creeping along the garden path to the back gate, she kept watch for any darker shadows, straining her ears for sounds of breathing or any rustling that might betray a presence. Only when she opened the gate, did she imagine, from the corner of her eye, a movement at the far end of the lane. Instinctively, she bolted in the other direction, where, with luck, Kit should already be waiting for her in the chaise. As she ran, holding onto her bonnet with one hand and her carpet bag with the other, she almost expected to hear pounding footsteps after

her or at least some rough voice commanding her to stop.

But the only sound in her ears was her own rapid breath and the hammering of her heart. Ahead of her something moved – horses, a carriage. Thank God. She ran on. The chaise door opened as she ran up to it, Kit leapt out under the dim lamp light and let down the steps. She fled up them into the carriage and he jumped up beside her.

“Go,” he commanded and all but slammed the door as the horses set off a crisp trot.

Gillie had never been so glad of the darkness. She thought she was going to cry.

She’d done it, and now there was no going back.

*

THE SMUGGLERS HAD fought viciously, like cornered rats, which at least gave Wickenden an excuse to hit one of them again very hard for what he’d done to Gillie the night of the castle ball. But the outcome had never really been in much doubt. Once the smugglers were subdued and captured, half of the men then returned to Blackhaven with their prisoners, while Wickenden and Fredericks rode with the rest for the coast and Braithwaite Cove.

Since the tide was out, they split forces, Fredericks taking half of the men along the beach while Wickenden rode on further with the others and then, abandoning the horses, descended via the cliff paths on foot. It was difficult without lights, for the night was dark. Even so, Wickenden could see the pale light from the ship almost at the shore now. They’d only just make it in time.

“Sir!” Someone fell into step beside him, panting with exertion. Even so, he held a half-eaten apple in one hand. “The lady I was watching crept out the back door and into a post chaise.”

He stopped dead, staring at his rough-looking underling. “What?”

“Captain Grantham was inside it, waiting for her. I saw him clear as day when he got out to let down the steps for her.”

For a moment, fear for her and sheer fury paralyzed him. Only then, with such massive relief that he felt dizzy, he realized what she was doing.

“No matter,” he said, walking on. “It’s a ruse.” Clearly, she was keeping Grantham out of the way to prevent tomorrow’s duel. “I’ll go round there after this. Run back, Corrie and keep watch till I get there.”

Impatient now to get this over with and be after Gillie if necessary, he scanned the beach below. A faint light appeared and disappeared rhythmically, clearly a signal to guide the approaching small boat which was now rowing out from the ship. In the instances the light on

the land glowed, he could make out two male figures on either side of it, one lifting and replacing the cover on the lantern.

He could even hear voices. "What's that?" said one clear English voice.

"Nothing. It is nothing," said the other voice, which might have been French.

"No, it's like...horses," the Englishman said, clearly puzzled. "Why would there be horses on the beach at this hour?"

"There would not," the French one said grimly. "Unless they were coming for us!" On the last word, he began to run across the sand and into the water, waving his arms at the approaching boat.

The Englishman, forgetting his signals, stood frozen for an instant and then spun around toward the cliffs. He knew he couldn't make it to the boat in time.

"Now," Wickenden said with relish and charged down the remaining few feet.

Their quarry finally saw them by the light of their own uncovered lanterns, and swerved, but there was no escape. The traitor drew a pistol from under his cloak, but his aim wavered as he tried to make up his mind which of his attackers to shoot.

Wickenden solved the problem for him by knocking up his arm and hitting him full in the face. The pistol fell from his grasp and exploded with a deafening report as it hit the rocky ground.

"Anyone hit?" Wickenden demanded as one of the soldiers picked up the smoking pistol.

A negative murmur came back. With their own quarry down, their attention was now all on Fredericks' riders chasing the Frenchman into the sea.

Wickenden snapped his fingers for a lantern and an instant later, gazed down on the dazed face of Major Randolph.

"I'm sorry it's you," Wickenden said without much surprise. "People seem to like you."

"Liking doesn't get you promotion," Randolph said sardonically. "Only money does in this God-forsaken country. At least the French promote according to ability."

"You sound like a good Jacobin," Fredericks sneered, wheezing up on his horse while his men rounded up the Frenchmen and those in the rowing boat for good measure.

Randolph laughed. "Trust me, I'd have made an excellent Jacobin if only I'd had the chance. Or a Bonapartist. It's all the same to me." He curled his lip at Wickenden. "I'm sorry it's you, too. I hope Kit Grantham beats the odds tomorrow and kills you."

"What a charming sentiment." Wickenden left him to the others and strode down the beach to where the Frenchman was being

dragged ashore, protesting loudly that he'd done nothing more than go for a night fishing trip, that this was an outrage and he insisted on seeing his brother the Comte de Garnache, who was a personal friend of the Prince Regent.

"I doubt that," Wickenden observed. "But your cousin, Mrs. Muir, will, I'm sure, be glad to have news of you."

Wickenden didn't even bother with farewells. Now that the action was done—and done with such relative ease—he found himself desperate to confirm his suspicions about Gillie's mysterious departure, to make sure she was safe.

As he threw himself on his horse at the top of the cliff path, he had to shut off the knowledge that only extreme distress could have driven her to such lengths. He hadn't done enough to reassure her that he had no intention of killing Kit. Perhaps some mean part of him resented that she cared so much for another man. Besides, Kit was an experienced soldier. It was hardly inconceivable that Captain Grantham could kill *him*.

He rode at full gallop back to the town and made his way directly to the Muirs'. Corrie materialized out of the darkness to hold his horse just as Bernard strolled up to the gate from the opposite direction. Danny loped along several paces behind him.

"Hello!" Bernard exclaimed, turning his key in the door. "Didn't expect to see you tonight."

"I'm afraid I need a word," Wickenden said impatiently, striding inside behind him.

Bernard, who'd clearly been imbibing, weaved slightly as he led Wickenden into the salon used for gaming. It was in darkness, and Bernard hastily lit a few candles while Wickenden talked.

"First, the traitors and French spies have all been arrested. You should all be safe now. Secondly...would you mind checking on your sister?"

Bernard paused, then set down the candle from which he'd been lighting the others, and turned to peer somewhat owlishly at Wickenden.

"My sister?" he said. "Not sure I take your point."

"Is she safe?" Wickenden demanded.

Bernard stared. "Well of course she's safe! You just told me so."

"Is she in her bedchamber?"

"Either there or in the parlor, I imagine. Come up."

At least Bernard no longer weaved as he ran upstairs, Wickenden at his heels. Something about Wickenden's questions seemed to have sobered him.

In the parlor, the elder Miss Muir was on her feet, gathering up her work as though preparing to retire.

“Oh good, Bernard, you’re back,” she said vaguely. “Goodness, is that Lord Wickenden with you? What an unexpected pleasure—”

“Where’s Gillie?” Bernard interrupted.

“She retired early. She’s still a little—”

“I’m just going to look in on her,” Bernard said, bolting from the room.

Miss Muir gazed after him in surprise, then sat down again. “What has happened?” she asked ominously.

“I’m not sure,” Wickenden said. “I would just like to be certain of her safety.”

Miss Muir’s frown deepened. She was clearly too alarmed to offer Wickenden a chair, and in any case, he was too on edge to sit. Instead, he paced until he heard hurried footsteps rushing back down the stairs.

So, she really had gone. He’d been hoping the chaise had just been a ruse to fool Corrie, whom she’d seen watching the house and following her. But hiring a post chaise was an expensive joke for people who had very little money.

Bernard reentered the room looking white. In one hand, he gripped what looked like a pile of letters. “She isn’t there,” he said flatly, staring at Wickenden. “How did you know?”

“I’m afraid I took the liberty of getting one of my people to make sure she was safe, and that no one entered the house whom you would not want here. My man saw her enter a poste chaise with Captain Grantham.”

Bernard’s brow cleared with relief. “Well that’s not so bad. At least she’s safe with Kit.”

But Miss Muir was quicker, and not, apparently, as deaf as most people imagined. “Are you telling us she’s eloped with Kit Grantham?”

“I think she might have wished us to think so,” Wickenden said. He pointed to the letters in Bernard’s still hand. “I suspect you’ll find her direction in there, along with a summons to you both to join her. It’s her way of preventing Captain Grantham from fighting me.”

This time it was the aunt who was baffled and Bernard who understood. A quick laugh exploded from his lips. “Damned if that isn’t just like her. Talk about a meddling female!” Glancing at the letters, he tossed one into his aunt’s lap, dropped one on the nearest chair, and tore open the last.

For some reason, although he knew what the letters would say, Wickenden found it hard to breathe evenly.

Bernard, his gaze still darting about the paper, said slowly, “She *has* gone with Kit. They’re to be married immediately. The one thing she could hold over him – why didn’t I see that?”

“Where is she?” Wickenden managed.

Bernard dropped the letter, letting it flutter unheeded to the floor. "She didn't say. But I imagine she's gone north into Scotland."

"By why?" Miss Muir all but wailed. "She was already engaged to the man. It was a respectable, if not brilliant match. No one objected. Why rush into this, when I could swear her heart was never in it anyway?"

The faint unease which had been with Wickenden, even when he thought he knew exactly what Gillie was doing, flooded through him now.

"Wait," he said abruptly. "Are you telling me she's left you no instructions to follow her? No direction where she might be found before morning?"

"Nothing like that," Miss Muir said worriedly, glaring at the letter as if she could force it thus to disgorge more information. "Only that she is sorry for the trouble. For some reason she seems to believe this is the only way to solve things, though *what* things could possibly be solved by such a mad start, I can't imagine."

Blood sang in Wickenden's ears. *She's really going to do it. She's really going to marry Grantham. To save him from me.*

For an instant, a deluge of absolute misery paralyzed him, not just his own loss but hers. She didn't want this. He'd never doubted that. And yet he'd been so wrong about everything else.

Bernard sank into the chair beside him. "You're right, Aunt Margaret. Her heart wasn't in it and I'm pretty sure Kit knew that. His mother's in Blackhaven, you know, and yet she's never called on us. I'm pretty sure she said something to Gillie, though, and I'm sure she and Kit never meant to go through with marriage."

Wickenden stared at him until Bernard raised his head and looked at him directly. "What," Bernard said shakily, "if Kit forced her into this? If he promised to give up this stupid duel and apologize to you if she would truly marry him."

"What a terrible beginning for any marriage," Miss Muir exclaimed. "It could never prosper."

"No," Wickenden said, striding almost blindly for the door, "And it never will."

"Where are you going?" Miss Muir asked, bewildered.

"To bring her home," Wickenden said savagely. "And to cut out Grantham's heart."

Chapter Fifteen

WITH MURDEROUS FURY in his own heart, Wickenden threw himself back on his horse and rode north out of Blackhaven. His rage was not just aimed at Grantham but at himself for leaving her open to this and then for not pursuing them as soon as Corrie had told them of her departure. How could he have been so blind, so sure of his own assumptions?

But then, he'd been blind about everything, including his own feelings. On no account would she marry any other man. She was his.

Leaving the town far behind, the darkness slowed him down. Fortunately, the earlier clouds were passing, providing a little more light, but still, thundering along the road, he had to strain his ears as well as his eyes for any other traffic. But he was driven on by the knowledge that they must be at least an hour ahead of him, perhaps more if they'd hired four horses for the chaise.

Taking another risk, he took the shortcut onto the Carlisle road which Braithwaite had told him about the last time he'd travelled there. It was over rough ground, not great for wheeled vehicles, but a horse and rider could shave as much as an hour off their journey—in daylight at least. In the dark, there were a lot more obstacles to negotiate.

However, Jett was one of Braithwaite's stable and he seemed to know the way. Wickenden gave him his head, and apart from being startled by a few scurrying creatures breaking from the undergrowth, he managed very well. Wickenden sustained no greater injury than a bruised shoulder from a tree branch he hadn't seen and Jett hadn't cared about.

Emerging from the wood onto a rocky path, he immediately heard the rumble of carriage wheels and the unmistakable cllop of multiple horses below. With a surge of determination, Wickenden dug in his heels, urging Jett back into a gallop to the end of the path, and jumping him down the bank into the road, where he wheeled about. Jett neighed in furious disapproval as he was forced to stand facing four oncoming horses and a carriage.

Fortunately, the carriage was travelling with sensible slowness in the darkness, and its lamps were lit outside and in. The coachman pulled up indignantly. "Here, what do you think you're about? Stand clear, there!"

Ignoring him, Wickenden urged Jett past the horses to the carriage door. Bending, he wrenched it open, not even sure what he would say to her—and found himself staring at two complete strangers, wide-eyed and frightened. One was a pretty young woman, the other an older gentleman with a slightly furtive air who clutched her arm tightly.

“Who the devil are you?” Wickenden blurted.

“I might ask you the same question!” the furtive man retorted. “Because you’re clearly not her father.”

Wickenden groaned. He’d stumbled across another eloping couple. The road to Gretna Green must be thick with them. He slammed the door again, then on second thought, pulled it open again and glared at the young woman.

“Do you *want* to be here with him?” he demanded.

“Of course she does,” blustered the furtive man. “Not that it’s any of your business!”

“I wasn’t speaking to you,” Wickenden snapped, without taking eyes from the girl who suddenly sobbed and lunged for the door.

“No! No, I want to go home! I want my mother! Oh please, sir, take me home!”

The furtive man grabbed her by the arm. “Jenny,” he expostulated. “We have an agreement, remember? Now sit still and let the gentleman—” He broke off at the screech of steel as Wickenden drew the sword he’d almost forgotten he was wearing and pointed it at the man’s throat until he slithered back and back against the opposite wall of the carriage.

“Step down,” Wickenden said to the girl who, released, scuttled out of the carriage and into the road. Wickenden withdrew his sword and slammed the door. “Drive on,” he commanded the coachman. “And don’t stop until you reach Carlisle.”

The coach drew away with alacrity, leaving Wickenden frowning down at a very young lady in a fur-lined cloak, gripping a carpet bag in both hands. “Now, what the devil am I to do with you?”

“You will take me home?”

“Where is home?”

“Near Kendal, sir.”

“Well, that’s not so far. You won’t get there tonight, though. I’ve something I need to do, first. Up you come.”

The girl grasped his hand willingly enough and he pulled her up behind him. She squeaked with alarm, trying to arrange her skirts decorously—a difficulty Wickenden hadn’t thought of and found it hard to care about right now.

“Pull your cloak around you,” he said impatiently. “There’s no one around to see in any case. Tell me, did you pass another carriage on

the road in the last hour?"

"There was a post chaise," the girl said after a moment. "At least I thought it was, but there were no postillions."

"How far back?" Wickenden demanded. He'd no desire to waste time chasing back the way if his true quarry was ahead.

"Only ten minutes or so. He said they would be another eloping couple if they were travelling at night, and I felt sorry for her..."

"Well why on earth were you eloping in the first place?" Wickenden demanded.

"I thought it might be fun," the girl said gloomily. "And he did seem like a perfect gentleman until we got underway and he tried to kiss me and it was disgusting and I realized I'd made a terrible mistake. And then you came and we were sure you were a highwayman." She pressed forward, trying to peer into his face. "You're *not* a highwayman, are you?"

"No, but I am likely to stop at least one more carriage. I'm looking for someone."

His ears had picked up the sound of another approaching carriage and horses, travelling at quite a sedate speed. Why, after all, would they travel any faster? No one should have known of their departure until morning. By which time, with a change of horses, they could already be at Gretna.

"Hold on," he said grimly. "Don't jerk or scream, whatever happens."

This time, he rode straight at the oncoming pair of horses, turning at the last minute to ride beside them and seizing the near horse's bridle.

"Woah, whoa," he said gently, while from the corner of his eye, he saw the indignant driver raise his whip. "Don't even think about it," Wickenden snapped at him. "Hold there or you *will* be arrested."

Complete nonsense though the threat was, the legality of the word *arrest* seemed to impress the coachman, who made no further effort to drive on. Wickenden dismounted, but kept hold of the reins as he strode to the chaise door and wrenched it open—and looked into the barrel of a pistol.

Behind it, by the light of one tiny candle lamp, were Kit Grantham's determined face, and Gillie's shocked one as she recognized him. In that one instant, his carefully planned speech, and all the calm, curt instructions he'd meant to issue, flew off into the wind.

"By God," he said hoarsely, "you will not marry him. You'll marry me."

Her turbulent eyes widened impossibly, her lips parted—and then the pistol reported and his arm jerked.

Gillie cried out. The unknown girl on his horse screamed, despite what he's told her, and while he glanced at his arm, which began to sting like hell, Gillie launched herself out of the carriage.

"What have you done?" she cried, falling into his arms. "Oh God, don't you dare be dead!"

And suddenly there was no question about what to do next. He simply bent his head and kissed her mouth soundly and thoroughly.

*

IT WASN'T NORMAL, Gillie felt, for dead and dying men to kiss with quite such...fervor. Not that she could understand why such a kiss should wipe out misery and fear with one swoop. Because there was no need of it. None at all.

"Not dead," she gasped against his lips.

"Don't harp on about death," he commanded, releasing her. "Do I look dead to you?"

"Well, no, but he – you're shot!"

"He winged me," Wickenden acknowledged, releasing her to examine his sleeve.

From the sluggishly spreading stain, the bullet had hit the fleshy part of his arm. He flexed it and shrugged.

Slowly, he raised his gaze to Kit, who stood bent in the carriage doorway, his lips thin, his face white.

"Not a very fair shot," Wickenden pointed out. "Did you think to save yourself the trouble of tomorrow's duel?"

"He thought you were a highwayman," Gillie said hastily.

Wickenden blinked. "How many highwaymen want to marry you?"

A sound very like a laugh issued from her throat before she hastily choked it off. Then, for the first time she became aware of the still figure on Wickenden's horse.

"Who is she?" Gillie asked blankly.

"No idea," Wickenden said without obvious interest. His gaze was now on Kit, who jumped down into the road. "You want to do this now?"

"You're wounded," Kit said stiffly. "And for what it's worth, a letter should reach you in the morning with my formal apology. I misunderstood, as Miss Muir has explained to me."

Wordlessly, Wickenden passed the reins to Gillie. "Then why did you shoot me?"

"Temper," Kit confessed. "I fired without really meaning to."

"Not a great trait for a seasoned soldier," Wickenden observed. "Did you force her to this? To elope for an apology?"

Kit lifted his chin. "Yes," he said defiantly.

“Then it’s fortunate you wear that sword,” Wickenden said softly, drawing his.

“Oh for the love of –” Gillie began, clutching her head with both hands. “What is the matter with men?”

Without a word, Kit drew his own sword. They backed behind the chaise, which gave them more space in the road, as well as the light from the chaise lamps. As one, they gave the fencer’s salute and began to circle each other.

“Are they fighting over you?” the girl on Lord Wickenden’s horse asked in awe.

“God knows,” Gillie said furiously. “Once, maybe.”

Kit lunged first, easily parried by Wickenden who drove him back almost immediately with a series of thrusts and cuts that Kit only just avoided. He stumbled, finding his feet and attacking in return.

“How romantic,” breathed the unknown girl. “Which one do you favor?”

“Neither,” Gillie said savagely. “Take your pick.”

“Well, the darker one did rescue me from Mr. Tamms. I think he must be very heroic.”

Gillie’s breath caught. “Well, you can’t have him,” she said perversely and releasing the reins, she strode off to the fighters. She’d had enough.

They didn’t see her coming, and in her fury, she didn’t care. She just knew they had to stop this. And so she walked straight in between them. Kit pulled back so quickly that he fell over. Wickenden, his eyes sparkling still with cold rage, desperately tried to change the direction of his blade and sliced into her cloak instead.

“Enough!” Gillie shouted. “There will be no more of this! No more, do you understand?”

Neither of them said anything, only stared at her in shock. For the first time ever, she was sure she saw fear in the wicked baron’s eyes. Because he’d so nearly cut her.

“Kit?” she said furiously, rounding on her old friend. “Do you understand?”

He nodded. “Yes,” he said hoarsely.

“My lord?” She turned back to Wickenden who, by way of answer, re-sheathed his sword. She frowned, “Why are you even wearing a sword with civilian dress?”

“It’s a long story,” Wickenden said vaguely. His eyes were searching her face. “It wasn’t his idea, was it? It was yours, just as I thought.”

She said nothing, merely turned away.

“So,” Wickenden said mildly, leading the way back to the side of the road where the unknown girl still sat upon his horse. “Let us sort

out this mess.”

“I’ll take her home,” Kit said quietly. “We can be there before morning. No one will know she’s gone.”

“Actually, her family knows, but they’re unlikely to tell.” Wickenden gazed thoughtfully at the girl on his horse. “I have a better idea. Down you come.”

Without ceremony, he lifted the girl off the horse. “This young lady wishes to return to her parents in Kendall. This is Captain Grantham, who will take you to his mother at the Blackhaven Hotel for the night and in the morning, will escort you to Kendal.”

Kit closed his mouth. “I will? You expect me to conduct your fl –.”

“I said *young lady*,” Wickenden interrupted, handing the girl into the coach. “She too made a mistake in eloping. You should get on famously.”

“And Gillie?” Kit demanded, glowering.

“I’m going to marry Gillie,” Wickenden said, catching the reins as his horse finally got bored and began to walk along the side of the road.

“No, you’re not,” Gillie said shakily.

Kit gazed at her and swallowed. “You choose,” he said. “Will you travel back with me in the chaise? Or with Lord Wickenden.”

Gillie bit her lip. For all sorts of reasons she would be safer in the carriage with Kit and the unknown girl. But Aunt Margaret and Bernard knew she’d left. The quicker she returned, the kinder it would be. On horseback they could save an hour, maybe.

“Please, hand me out my bag. I’ll go with Lord Wickenden.”

*

TEN MINUTES LATER, she rode away with Lord Wickenden, held before him in the saddle too closely for decorum.

It was Wickenden who had made the chaise drivers turn their vehicle, under threat of doing it himself if they weren’t capable of such a simple operation. After which, he bowed civilly to Miss Smallwood—it was Gillie rather than Wickenden himself who’d discovered her name – and turned to help Gillie into the saddle.

After mounting the bank and riding into the wooded area, the horse slowed to a walk.

Abruptly, Wickenden said, “Why did you think I would kill him?”

She shook her head. “I knew you wouldn’t *mean* to. I just...couldn’t bear it if it happened by accident. And talking of accidents, your arm must be seen to!”

“It’s a flesh wound, barely touched me,” Wickenden said impatiently. “Don’t change the subject. Did I misunderstand

everything so badly? Do you actually love Grantham that you *couldn't* bear me to hurt him?"

Involuntarily, she jerked against him, "I couldn't bear... It was just..." Suddenly it was all too much for her. A silent sob wracked her body and she couldn't prevent the tears escaping and trailing down her cheeks. She couldn't even wipe them with her sleeve, without drawing attention to them.

But he'd seen or felt something.

"Gillie," he whispered, "Gillie, don't." His fingers brushed against her cheek, the corner of her eye. "Please don't cry. I'll take you back to him if that's what you truly want."

"It isn't!" she said, half turning to pound one clenched fist on his chest. "Don't you understand? I could not bear you to suffer more. What you've done, why ever you do it, it *hurts* you! I saw something when you told me about the man who might yet die from your last duel and I didn't want...I couldn't let you do it!"

He stared at her, a frown twitching on his brow. "Me," he said blankly. A strange wonder filled his quiet voice. "You did this for *me*?"

The tears flowed unchecked now. "Kit is like another, much stupider brother to me," she said, aiming for lightness. "I would always look after him if I could. But it was your soul I feared for." She tried to laugh and only managed a sob. "How ridiculous is that?"

"Oh Gillie, Gillie," he whispered. The horse had come to a halt, and both Wickenden's arms closed around her. His cheek pressed against hers, warm and soothing. "You care for me. I don't deserve such care."

"I love you," she said, because she had to say it once. "But it doesn't matter."

His cheek left hers. "*Doesn't matter?*"

She didn't know if it was laughter or tears in her throat and it didn't seem to matter. The world was already hazy when he dismounted and lifted her down. He looped the reins around a thick tree branch and turned to her.

"It makes everything right," he said softly. Taking her face between his hands, he kissed her long and sweetly, and when the kiss ended naturally, he began another, and another with increasing passion that swept her along in its wake. Her hands trembled as she gripped his wrists, and yet when he released her, she could only reach up and take back his mouth.

His arms closed around her, pressing her so closely into his body that she felt every hard inch of it. Excitement soared, intensified by the emotion she could no longer hide. She did love him. She was proud to love him. No one would ever kiss her, caress her like this again...

He lifted her, burying his lips in her throat, between her breasts, and then the world seemed to dive. Somehow, she was lying on her back, his cloak and hers covering the soft ground. Cool air brushed against her naked breasts and yet she'd never known such exquisite heat.

She threw her arms around him, feeling only the soft linen of his shirt under her grasping fingers, and then his skin, warm and velvet. His back rippled in response to her every caress. His mouth closed on her nipple and kissed in one long, tender stream. She closed her eyes in bliss, holding his head with her fingers threaded in his short, soft hair.

She no longer knew if she wore any clothes at all, for his hands caressed her everywhere, her waist, her hips, her legs, and then, most shockingly of all, in the secret place between her thighs. He lingered there, his fingers stroking while he kissed her breasts and teased her nipples with his tongue. And when he raised his head, his eyes were hot and clouded, his breath heaving as he took her mouth and settled his weight, so excitingly heavy between her hips.

Although he held her face between his hands, he still, somehow, seemed to caress the aching tenderness between her legs. In the very moment she realized exactly what it was that stroked her, he entered her body, and her mouth opened wide in shock.

He lay still and kissed her mouth.

"What are you doing?" she whispered against his lips.

"You know. I'm making you mine."

"I've always been yours," she confessed brokenly, and he moved, pushing deeper within her and beginning to rock gently.

She had some vague idea from Dulcie's obscure remarks and overheard whispers of married women and maids, that this should hurt more. Perhaps it would have if she hadn't wanted this so much; if she hadn't been so awed by his face above hers, moving with the easy, tender strokes of his body. He watched her avidly by the light of the stars, his lips parted, his eyes intense. He undulated beneath her hands, which caressed and scraped against his skin in rising wonder, instinctively grasping his hips and drawing him into her.

Without conscious volition, she moved with him, sensing with her eyes and her body the pleasure it gave him, even as she learned how it intensified her own. His whole being seemed to tremble as if he were holding back with more effort than she could ever understand. And yet, he never stopped and never hurt her, just rocked relentlessly within her, caressed her, kissed her, until she exploded into joy.

He muttered something incomprehensible, covering her mouth with his as the rapture shook her. She clung to him, her one anchor in a world that would never be steady again.

When she could pry her eyes open, she slid her mouth free and smiled at him in unutterable wonder.

His lips stretched in response. His eyes were bright with triumph. "Again," he whispered, and began to move once more. She met him eagerly this time, catching the echoes of her pleasure and reaching. But this time was faster, just a little wilder, and with awe, she learned the power of a man's passion when he finally lost control and fell upon her, groaning with agonized joy and emptied himself inside her.

As she held him, she wanted to weep again, but this time from pure, unfettered happiness.

*

"I WISH WE could stay here forever," she murmured into his shoulder.

They lay together in a close embrace. Beneath the cloaks which wrapped them like a binding, what clothes they still wore were in utter disarray. Gillie waited for shame or even embarrassment to seep into her happiness, but it never did. Nothing in the world had ever been sweeter than lying here with him, her whole body still languid from what they'd done. She'd never expected such beauty, such utter...gladness.

"It's a tempting idea," he agreed sleepily. "In an unworldly, romantic kind of a way." He stretched his long body against her. "However, speaking practically, it's too cold and too damp to be remotely comfortable for very long. By morning, you'd have a severe chill. Besides, you chose this way to be home faster."

Laughter bubbled up inside her. "That was somewhat optimistic." But reality was intruding once more, and she sat up, straightening her chemise while Wickenden played lady's maid so deftly that it spoke volumes for his past intimacy with women. He fastened his pantaloons, and discovered her pelisse and his coat, dangling haphazardly together from a tree branch, along with her bonnet.

But even dressed and decorous once more, their new closeness remained. Tucked against his chest as his horse carried them through the wood and over the rough moor, whether at walking speed, cantering or flat-out gallop, she soaked up his nearness and his open conversation. They talked of many things on that journey, of family and childhood, of friends and politics, of music and of conventions and duties one railed against.

The wicked baron, it turned out, had a very strong sense of duty. Although he'd never wanted the title or the lands that came with it, he cared deeply for the wellbeing of his people and the state of the land he would pass on to his heirs. He spent long periods of time there, rarely visiting other country houses. Only during the London season

did he break out and become the wicked baron.

"It was a character I fell into, at first as a wager, to see if I could make people follow some ridiculous fashion. But it was like a—*a*—release. As if I took out all my frustrations with life in those few weeks in the year. But I confess it palls. Younger, more ambitious men pick fights with me and suddenly I'm as hemmed in by expectations—albeit different expectations—as I ever was."

"Is that why you came to the castle?"

"Perhaps. Partly." He laughed. "I think I had some notion of rekindling a liaison with my first love, to remind me, maybe, of who I used to be."

"And did you?" she asked, before she could help herself. He wouldn't want to tell her, and she doubted she really wanted to know. Especially when Lady Crowmore's intriguing and devastatingly beautiful face swam determinedly into her mind.

However, he only smiled into her hair. "No. As soon as I met you, I couldn't think of anyone else."

"Really?" she said, enchanted.

He kissed her, as though to prove it.

"And Mrs. Derwent?" she asked breathlessly.

He shrugged. "When she heard I was coming up here, she asked me to seek you out and send you about your business. I was curious to meet you and felt no compunction about detaching her son from some scheming hussy. I suppose I've done that," he added complacently.

"Yes, you're very clever," she mocked. "Only why did she pick on you? Why not on Lord Braithwaite himself? Or if she only wished to buy me off, why not someone like Lady Crowmore?"

"I hoped you wouldn't ask me that. She presumed on old... friendship."

"Friendship," Gillie repeated.

He sighed. "It was a long time ago."

"Are there any women of the *haute tonne* who haven't been your mistress at one time or another?" she asked severely.

"It's behind me," he said simply. "Even before I came here that life was boring me."

"So you only wanted Lady Crowmore?"

He hesitated, shifting uncomfortably behind her. "I thought I might. But it turned out I wanted something—and someone—entirely different."

"You're very good at this," she said admiringly. "I suppose it's the practice."

"Minx. What do I have to do or say to convince you I will be a model husband?"

And there it was again. Reality. "No, you won't," she said softly.

"I will try," he insisted. "And I will be faithful."

"My lord—"

"My lord?" he repeated. "You cannot still be calling me that!"

She smiled reluctantly. "Wickenden seems so impersonal. And too close to wicked."

"That has been my curse," he murmured. "But I also have a name. I believe I told you on our first meeting."

"David," she remembered, and he dropped a kiss on the top of her head.

"Better. Now, I think you were about to impugn my fidelity."

"No, I wasn't. I believe you are faithful in your own way. I don't mind that it isn't a *forsaking all others* kind of a way."

He blinked. "It isn't?"

She smiled, just a little sadly and shook her head. "It's for the best. Because I would rather die than force you into something as huge as marriage, something I know you don't want, not with me."

She felt his stunned gaze on her face, but she wouldn't look at him, not yet.

"Force me?" he said unexpectedly. "You just tried to marry another man. I had to chase you across the country and fight a duel to reclaim you. Who is forcing whom?"

She waved that away impatiently. "That is honor. I won't be a sacrifice to honor."

A flickering glance showed her his half fascinated, half frustrated expression. "Then what *will* you have, my Gillyflower? What do you want of me?"

She took a deep breath. "A *carte blanche*," she blurted.

"What?"

She smiled, ridiculously grateful for his shock. He really would have married her. "I cannot love anyone else. If the events of tonight have taught me anything, it is that I long more than anything to be with you. But you need a wife of higher standing."

"For God's sake, you are not the blacksmith's daughter," he retorted. "And I'm not sure I would care if you were."

"David, I'm not of your world," she said desperately.

"You mean I'm not of yours?"

"It's the same thing."

"And you'd dishonor your family rather than be my wife?"

"You needn't phrase it quite like that, and I hope in time, they'll forgive me."

With one hand, he tipped her face up by the chin and searched it. "You're serious," he observed. "You would leave everything here just to be with me."

"I would," she said huskily. "If you'll have me."

“On any terms.”

“On my terms.”

His breath seemed to catch. “You think because I took you in the woods, I would not respect you as my wife? If there was any thought beyond love and blind lust, it was to make you my wife.”

“I will be your mistress until you marry.”

“And then, what? You’ll walk away? Share me?”

It was getting harder to meet his fierce, yet increasingly unreadable gaze. “I don’t know.” She was afraid, suddenly, that she’d gone too far, that she’d lost him at the last.

His breath caught in his throat. “You’re an unpredictable little thing, Gillie Muir. I can see you are going to lead me a shocking dance.”

Relief flooded her, causing a huge smile to break out. He swooped, kissing her lips, and urged the horse into a gallop.

When the sea and the town of Blackhaven finally came into view, Gillie couldn’t help feeling disappointed that her time with Lord Wickenden was about to end. When she’d left with such a heavy heart, only a few hours earlier, she’d never imagined she would return so happy, let alone with the wicked baron as her lover.

“There’s something else,” he said suddenly. “The reason, in fact, you got as far as you did before I caught up with you. Colonel Fredericks has arrested the men who tried to abduct you, along with their contacts. Major Randolph was one of the names on Jack’s document, as was your stepmother’s cousin. If she is your stepmother.”

In any other circumstances, she’d have been reeling from such information. Now she uttered a relatively mild, “Goodness!” She frowned. “I must ask Isabella how she met him, how she came to be in his company... But Major Randolph? A French spy? Truly?”

“I believe it is a recent turnaround, when he saw his chances of promotion fade. Fredericks said he recommended Randolph to take over as colonel of the 44th when he retired, but that he was passed over. Then again, he was chosen to stay behind while other officers went to Spain, with all the chances for field promotions. I believe he thought he’d do better with Bonaparte.”

“Maybe he would,” Gillie said sadly.

“Maybe. But if I was Bonaparte, I certainly wouldn’t ever have trusted him. A man who can betray his country will betray anyone for the right price.”

“Do you know, he was the only one who would give me any information at all about your duel with Kit.”

Wickenden curled his lip. “That does not surprise me.”

“I liked him all the better for it,” Gillie said defiantly.

“But then, you would rather be my mistress than my wife.”

He took her by surprise, because she'd imagined that conversation was over. But when she turned to peer up at him, he only drew the hood up over her hair.

“Keep your face hidden,” he advised, as they rode into town. He turned the horse immediately off the main road and took quiet back streets, avoiding the few people still abroad. Even the most dissipated of revelers should have been asleep by now, but even so, Wickenden dismounted and tethered his horse to a lamp post in case it was recognized closer to Gillie's house.

After that, the fun came back to the evening, as they dodged the Watch and a couple of weaving drunks, hiding behind trees, diving through back lanes, and even climbing over Mrs. Percy's garden wall before coming at last to the lane behind Cliff Crescent. Wickenden approached the house with great wariness. Even though the spies were imprisoned, he didn't trust those members of the Watch not in Colonel Fredericks's confidence not to come back in search of Smuggler Jack.

But they made the back garden without incident.

“What if Danny did bolt the back door?” Gillie whispered.

“He's more likely to be waiting behind it.”

“To hit you?” she teased.

For answer he took her in his arms. “For now,” he said, “you must keep our business between us. You only decided you did not wish to elope with Grantham. If you mention my name, just say I helped you to get home.”

“I suppose they've had enough shocks for one day,” Gillie allowed, although she couldn't help a twinge of anxiety at his words. Was he having second thoughts?

“Exactly.” He kissed her in such a way as to remove any doubt and make her remember instead exactly what they'd done in the woods.

When she heard the bolts being flung back on the door behind her, she jumped. With a breath of laughter, Wickenden released her and she turned to face the pale, wide-eyed figure of Danny.

“Thank God,” he uttered and opened the door wide. Behind him stood her aunt and Bernard, reaching out for her, and she fell into their arms with incoherent apologies.

Chapter Sixteen

ALTHOUGH GILLIE SLEPT almost until midday, preparations for the regular card party were well in hand when she finally rose. Bernard and Aunt Margaret had also slept late, but it seemed the servants could manage perfectly well without them. Mattie and Charles had been shopping, Cook was already preparing the supper dishes, and Danny, who seemed to function on practically no sleep, had set up all the tables and chairs in the salons and was in the process of bringing wine and brandy up from the cellar.

Aunt Margaret joined Gillie in the salon doorway, and for a few moments they stood in silence, examining the changes to what had once been their main reception room. Although she was about to commit a much larger breach of etiquette in becoming Wickenden's mistress, Gillie had begun to see many things, especially the card parties, as they must have appeared to him. And to Lady Braithwaite, Isabella, and the other ladies of Blackhaven. Perhaps she and Bernard had done nothing wrong, but the parties could easily get out of hand.

Gillie said, "It isn't *quite* the thing, is it?"

"No," Aunt Margaret agreed. "Not *quite*. I suppose needs must when the Devil drives."

She needed a better plan to care for herself and her family. Even as his mistress, she could not take money from Wickenden. In fact, on a practical or even a moral level, it was a step down from this. She needed to think of something else.

She needed, she realized, to speak to Wickenden himself. She could think of no one she'd rather consult with on any issue, now that they trusted each other. Now that he was her lover.

Heat rose from her toes, suffusing her body with pleasure. She could accomplish anything now and she couldn't wait to see him again.

During the afternoon, she went to Isabella's room and found her dressed and laying the baby down in his cradle.

"You're feeling stronger," Gillie said warmly. "Excellent! Are you going to join us for dinner?"

"If Arthur allows!"

"Arthur will allow," Gillie said firmly. "One way or another. Come and sit in the parlor."

Aunt Margaret had gone to visit friends, so they had the parlor to

themselves for the time being.

"Tell me," Gillie said, as they sat at opposite sides of the fire place, "how did you meet your cousin, Monsieur de Garnache?"

Isabella frowned, "I have heard nothing from him, you know, since he went to London...He called to pay his respect after your father died."

"Then you didn't grow up knowing him?"

"No, but I always knew we were related to the Grenaches in France. My mother kept in touch with them after the revolution, though of course we lost touch in recent years. Why do you ask?"

"It seems," Gillie said carefully, "that M. de Garnache was involved in a Bonapartist plot against Great Britain. I think he needed you as an excuse, a means, if you will, to get into the country and arrange a network of spies with Major Randolph of the 44th."

Isabella's eyes widened and then unexpectedly hardened. "You think I am part of this, too. I have been cursed, cursed since your father died."

"Of course I don't think that," Gillie scoffed, adding in the interest of truth. "Though it's true I might have a week ago. I can see that your only interest is in your baby."

Isabella gave her another long look, almost bewildered. "Not my only interest," she said at last. "I would like to see you and your brother settled and happy. And Margaret also."

Gillie almost blurted out her plans to be just that, although she remembered her promise to Lord Wickenden just in time. "You are kind," she said instead.

Isabella's smile was slightly lopsided. "Not always. I was not kind when I first met you. I can see now there is no badness in you, or in what you do here, but I cannot like it."

"To own the truth, I don't really like it myself. But we must live."

Isabella waved that aside. "You would be happy to live here with me? Or to let me and Arthur live here with you!"

"We would," Gillie said warmly. "Although I might like to travel a little now..." She broke off, clearing her throat. "But if we stop the parties, it will not be so easy to make ends meet. Perhaps we need to put our heads together and think of a better way to earn a living."

"We will," Isabella agreed. Her expression said that for now she was content just to have gained the admission from Gillie that the card parties should end.

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ALTHOUGH GILLIE FOUND herself glancing frequently out of the front windows and straining her ears for sounds of visitors, Lord Wickenden

did not call that afternoon. In fact, no one did. Gillie almost sent for Kit to find out if he forgave her, and how Miss Smallwood fared with his mother. Poorly, she could only imagine. Kit was probably conducting the poor little thing back to her parents after his mother had insulted her horribly.

As she changed into the amber gown for the evening, Gillie wrinkled her nose, aware that she'd have to wear the same gown to the Assembly ball tomorrow night. How maddening that the new green gown had got so torn the night of the castle ball.

On impulse, she dug out what was left of it. Some of the lace trim was torn, but not all it. Gillie went back to her wardrobe and brought out the old white muslin she'd worn to her first grown up party. The dark green trim provided a striking contrast, and with a little judicious stitching, it would look a lot less like a debutantes gown. Maybe.

On impulse, she took both to Dulcie in Isabella's room and asked if it might work.

"It might. But I can't see well enough to do this kind of work now," the old nurse replied.

"I can do it," Isabella said unexpectedly.

"Will you come to the ball?" Gillie asked eagerly.

"Oh no, I couldn't leave Arthur, not yet. But I will help make you even more beautiful!"

*

THAT EVENING, WAITING for Lord Wickenden – David – to arrive seemed more nerve-wracking than anything else that had happened to her in the last two weeks. She hadn't even known him a fortnight, and yet he'd turned her entire world upside down.

If this had been the first party they'd held, she was sure it would have been a flop, for neither Aunt Margaret nor Bernard seemed to have their minds anywhere but on her. She kept finding their anxious eyes gazing in her direction—while her own attention kept straying toward the door, waiting for a man who never came.

Sheer familiarity got her through the evening. She smiled and said all the right things, made sure everyone was welcome and the atmosphere convivial. But increasingly, despite the company and despite her efforts to laugh at herself, she felt alone and abandoned.

He didn't come. The words repeated themselves over and over in her mind as she wearily climbed the stairs to bed. She knew her disappointment was out of all proportion, but the knowledge didn't help. She worried that he was ill, that Lord Braithwaite had taken a turn for the worse, that he was having second thoughts about having anything to do with her. That Lady Crowmore had come back, or

some other guest of the countess's had caught his roving eye.

He was the wicked baron. He was so intriguing, so charming when he chose to be, that she'd fallen under his spell knowing virtually nothing about him. A nasty, insidious little voice whispered in her mind that he could not possibly be interested in her, that now that he'd had his way with her, she'd never see him again, even if she had a child from last night's intimacy.

But she refused to listen to that voice. She had never found him to be the man the world described. He'd ridden across Cumbria for her, to prevent her marrying another man, and he'd made love to her with bone-melting tenderness. Not that she had any experience to compare to her first, but she hadn't imagined the closeness between them as they'd ridden back to Blackhaven together.

She just needed patience to wait for word from him.

The first news she had of him came, in fact, from Bernard the following afternoon. Her brother had walked up to the castle for a few games of cards with Lord Braithwaite and when he returned, sat down with the ladies and his small half-brother to take a cup of tea.

"Is the countess going to the ball tonight?" Aunt Margaret asked.

"Yes, I believe so," Bernard replied with a grin. "There's even some talk of carrying his lordship there before he dies of boredom!"

"Poor man," Gillie sympathized. "Does Lord Wickenden not keep him entertained enough?"

"Probably, in normal circumstances, but he ain't there."

Gillie's ears sang. She had to force herself to loosen her clenched fingers. "Not there? You mean he has abandoned Lord Braithwaite and returned to London?"

"No idea," Bernard said infuriatingly. "It never came up. I just know he wasn't there when I was. He could have ridden down to the beach or sailed to Africa for all I know."

None of this helped Gillie's ridiculous state of nerves. Part of her wanted to avoid the ball now, and another evening of watching the door. But Isabella, Dulcie, and Mattie had gone to a great deal of trouble to trim her old white muslin into a thing of charming beauty. And Isabella had given her a shawl to wear with it—a fine, embroidered silk that rustled and caught the light whenever she moved—and a Spanish comb to wear in her hair.

And then, Aunt Margaret so wished to go. She'd been looking forward to it ever since the last subscription ball.

And so, Gillie pulled herself together and gave herself a sharp scold, for she refused to turn into one of those pathetic creatures who went to parties only to gaze longingly at the object of their love who barely deigned to speak to them—no doubt being put quite out of countenance with all that staring. If something had happened to

Wickenden, she would hear. Until then, there was no point in worrying about nothing.

With such sensible self-advice, she could admire herself in the glass while Isabella and Aunt Margaret smiled proudly at her reflection, and then walk gaily downstairs to command Bernard's reluctant escort.

Since it was a fine evening, they walked the short distance to the Assembly Rooms, which were a blaze of lights, outside and in. A lot of the new visitors to the town were elderly or infirm, but they often brought with them a supply of younger and fitter people desperate for entertainment, and so it proved that evening.

The entrance was promisingly crowded and the rooms themselves were already busy, jewels and bright gowns sparkling under the extravagant chandeliers. It wasn't Braithwaite Castle, but it was quite impressive for an assembly in such a small town which, until a couple of years ago, could boast very little genteel company other than the squire, the vicar, the officers of the 44th, and the generally absent castle folk.

The orchestra played in their own little mezzanine gallery in the largest room with its gleaming dance floor, off which were a card room and a supper room. Liveried servants offered glasses of wine and lemonade.

"Oh they have made excellent work of this," Aunt Margaret approved. "What a pity our London visitors have all gone."

"Who is that ravishing creature?" Bernard breathed suddenly.

"So much for Lady Crowmore," Gillie teased, although far from displeased to see his affections distracted. "Which ravishing creature?"

"By the wall, next to the dragon in purple."

Gillie followed his gaze across the room and found the purple dragon at once. Mrs. Derwent. And at her side, a very young, pretty girl with shining blonde hair and an expression at once avid and scared. Although she seemed vaguely familiar, it took Gillie several moments to recognize her.

"Why, it's Miss Smallwood!" she exclaimed.

"You *know* her?" Bernard demanded, pulling Gillies' hand into his arm. "Introduce me!"

Gillie shook him off, laughing. "Let us settle somewhere first! And you know, I'm not sure I can introduce you. For one thing, Mrs. Derwent really doesn't like me."

"Who's Mrs. Derwent?"

"The dragon in purple," Gillie said dryly. "And Kit Grantham's mother to boot."

Bernard scowled as Gillie and her aunt found chairs to sit in at the side of the dance floor. "Dash it, Gillie, that's another thing. Am I speaking to Kit or not? I should probably call the fellow out!"

"You should no such thing!" Gillie exclaimed. "There will be no more duels in Blackhaven! Ever!"

"Hear, hear!" said a lazy, half amused voice behind them and Gillie turned with genuine pleasure to greet the Earl of Braithwaite, who, with his heavily bandaged and splinted leg held out before him, was being carried by two burly footmen from the castle. "Drop me here," Braithwaite instructed, "If the Miss Muirs do not object!"

It seemed more probable that Lady Braithwaite, following him into the room with a female companion Gillie didn't know, would object, or at least choose to sit somewhere else entirely. But she duly sailed across the floor and greeted the Muirs graciously before introducing them to her companion, Lady Rushton.

"Ah, so you are the famous Miss Muir," Lady Rushton said amiably, seating herself by Gillie's side.

"Oh dear, am I?" Gillie said lightly, steeling herself to be polite under yet another stranger's scolds for the way she chose to keep a roof over her head.

"Why, yes, I hear you are Wickenden's latest flirt." She smiled without blinking as Gillie's face flamed.

Was this yet another of the baron's women, past or present? Whoever she was, Gillie refused to be intimidated. She lifted her chin. "I hope I may call him a friend," she said stiffly. "As I presume you do?"

"Lord no, can't stand the man," Lady Rushton drawled. "He's my brother, so I may insult him with impunity."

"Oh!" Gillie gazed with fresh curiosity at the woman who, dark and striking, and perhaps only just on the wrong side of thirty, did indeed bear some resemblance to Lord Wickenden. "Yes, I can see the likeness," she said faintly. "Are you also staying with Lady Braithwaite?"

"Oh no, I've put up at the hotel. Taking the waters in the hope of producing a son for my lord and master. Though why water should make one conceive sons instead of daughters is beyond me. Especially when one already has four of the latter."

"Well statistically, surely, you must have a son at some stage," Gillie suggested. "With or without the waters."

Lady Rushton's eyes began to dance. "Thank you for entering the spirit of the discussion. I can see why Wickenden likes you. I can even see why he's picked on an unmarried lady for once. You are very lovely."

Gillie blinked. "No, I'm not."

"Trust me on that score," Lady Rushton said. "Good lord, is that Lilian Derwent? What a cozy party this has turned out to be. Excuse me..."

Gillie watched her make her way across the floor.

"Maybe I should get *her* to introduce me," Bernard muttered.

"Run after her then," Gillie retorted. "If you're brave enough."

Bernard grinned. "She's Wickenden's sister, no mistake."

Lieutenant Green appeared then to ask Gillie for a dance, closely followed by several other men who'd attended the card parties. At least her card was filling up and she wouldn't need to spend too long watching the door.

"I don't believe she's come to take the waters at all," Braithwaite confided to Gillie. "I'll bet Kate Crowmore stayed with her on her way south and now she's come to see for herself."

"I can't imagine why," Gillie snapped. "Not least because he isn't even here!"

"He's meant to be," Braithwaite said. "He went off to York yesterday but claimed he'd be back today. I suspect it's a longer journey than he imagined."

Appalled to imagine what kind of description Lady Crowmore might have given Wickenden's sister to send her scampering up here, Gillie tried not to imagine people's reactions if they discovered exactly what had happened last night—her elopement with one man and seduction by another. Put like that, she appalled herself, and here she was planning to be his mistress. Could she really bear that?

If he loved her, she could bear anything. Anything other than tying him to her for reasons of convention or honor. In the meantime, she had Mrs. Derwent still, no doubt, trying to part her from Kit, and now Lady Rushton checking her over to see if she were a reasonable brood mare or if she should be parted from Wickenden. Why could people never mind their own business?

She was highly relieved when the orchestra struck up the first country dance of the evening and she took her place with the undemanding Lieutenant Green. By chance, her set also included Kit and Miss Smallwood.

The movements didn't make it easy to talk with much privacy, though as she turned with Kit she did murmur, "Are we still friends, Kit?"

A quick relieved smile flickered over his face. "I hope so. I'd hate to have made a mess of our friendship as well as everything else."

"The mess was all mine," she said ruefully, and then they parted.

Standing in the line beside Miss Smallwood, she smiled at the younger girl, who merely looked terrified. Which was interesting when she hadn't seem terribly put-out last night, either by the duel or being passed from stranger to stranger. Only when Gillie picked up the direction of the girl's darting glances, did she begin to suspect what was happening.

As the dance came to an end, she took Lieutenant Green's arm and contrived to walk in the same direction as Kit and Miss Smallwood.

"I'm glad to see you here, Miss Smallwood," Gillie said pleasantly, then in lower tones. "Have I offended you somehow? Or do you not know me?"

"Oh no, no! That is, of course, I know you! But I am not meant to speak to you..."

"Did Mrs. Derwent tell you I was a wicked harpy?"

Miss Smallwood gave a quick, mischievous smile, hastily covered with her hand. "Something like that," she whispered. "I know you aren't, but she terrifies me so, and in truth, I do like Captain Grantham excessively."

"There is much to like," Gillie agreed warmly. "I imagined he would have taken you back to your parents by now."

"Mrs. Derwent has sent for them instead. They should be here by tomorrow."

"Ah, well that will be more comfortable for you." She swerved to the left with Lieutenant Green and Miss Smallwood, and Kit broke to the right.

"Well?" Bernard demanded as soon as she sat down once more. "Did you mention me to her?"

"Actually, no, there was no time. Your purple dragon has forbidden her to speak to us."

"What did I ever do to her?" Bernard demanded.

"You are merely unfortunate in sisters," Gillie said gravely. "But the good news is, her parents will be coming tomorrow so she will no doubt stay in Blackhaven until the day after."

"Maybe I should speak to Kit. If we don't come to blows, I'll get him to introduce me. Quietly!"

"Good luck," Gillie murmured as Bernard set off purposefully across the floor.

From glimpses gained throughout the next dance, she saw Bernard gravely inscribing his name on Miss Smallwood's dance card while Kit looked on with amused tolerance, and Miss Smallwood smiled brightly to have another dance partner. Mrs. Derwent seemed to be discouraging at the very least.

It was as this dance finished that the main ballroom door opened and allowed her a glimpse of some commotion in the foyer beyond. A short, dumpy woman in traveling clothes glared at Mr. Hawthorne who managed the Assembly Rooms, while a male voice whose owner she couldn't see, appeared to be haranguing him.

Then the door closed again behind a gentleman who answered his friend's question with a languid, "Someone trying to gain admission without a ticket. God knows why. It's not as if they're dressed for

dancing. They must have got the wrong evening. What night do they admit the great unwashed?"

Since the lady looked far from unclean, Gillie thought his remark somewhat unkind, but paid no further attention to the matter until, after the next dance, she left the ballroom to fetch her aunt's shawl from the cloakroom.

Mr. Hawthorne stood triumphant at the head of the foyer while two liveried footmen guarded the ballroom door. But the couple, though clearly vanquished, had not given up entirely. They merely stood further back by the front entrance to the building.

"Madam!" the woman called unexpectedly. "I beg the favor of a word!"

Although Mr. Hawthorne began to charge across the foyer, Gillie civilly altered course to speak to the lady, whose husband seemed to be of much the same build, though crammed into a loud, checked coat that was at least two sizes too small for him.

"What might I do for you, ma'am?" Gillie inquired.

"That man—" The lady pointed to the advancing Mr. Hawthorne, "...is keeping us from our daughter! He will not allow us to enter without a ticket and yet will not sell us one! He claims my daughter is not here, though I don't see how he could possibly know!"

He knew from her accent, of course, which was unashamedly Cumbrian.

"I am sorry to hear that," Gillie said politely.

"Perhaps you could tell her we're here?" the man suggested, glaring triumphantly at Mr. Hawthorne.

"I don't believe I know your daughter," Gillie said apologetically.

"Of course Miss Muir does not know her," Mr. Hawthorne said, affronted by the very idea.

"Miss Smallwood," the man said defiantly. "Miss Jane Smallwood!"

Gillie blinked. "Then on the contrary, I do know her slightly. You are her parents?"

"James Smallwood," the man said, creaking as he bowed, "And Mrs. Smallwood, my lady wife. Miss Muir, did I hear?"

"Yes, indeed," Gillie said faintly.

"Who is she with?" Mr. Smallwood demanded.

"With Mrs. Derwent, who is a most respectable lady, and her son, Captain Grantham."

"Not Lord Wickenden?" Mr. Smallwood sounded more disappointed than anxious, although that might just have been his manner of speaking.

"No, I don't believe Lord Wickenden is here." Questions rushed upon her, but she swallowed them back. "Allow me just to fetch my aunt's shawl and then I will go back and tell Miss Smallwood that you

are here.”

“Thank you, Miss,” Mrs. Smallwood said gratefully. “You are very good.”

“Too good,” Mr. Hawthorne muttered behind her.

Gillie cast him a quelling glance.

When she reentered the ballroom, it was all aflutter, for the waltz had been announced. Bernard and Kit sat on either side of Miss Smallwood while Bernard tried to persuade her to dance with him. He seemed oblivious to Mrs. Derwent’s glares, as did Kit.

Gillie dropped the shawl around her aunt’s shoulders and left her to enjoy her comfortable gossip with Mrs. Hoag while she walked directly up to Mrs. Derwent.

“Good evening, ma’am,” she said pleasantly. Despite the older lady’s repelling stare. “I suspect you, as well as Miss Smallwood, would like to know that her parents are in the foyer, desirous of seeing her.”

“Oh dear,” Miss Smallwood said, quite unfilially. “I did not expect them so soon.”

For some reason, everyone looked toward the door, as if expecting them to materialize there. Over Mr. Hawthorne’s presumably lifeless body.

But it was not the plump figures of the Smallwoods who entered, just as the orchestra struck up the opening strains of a waltz, but the tall, impeccably dressed Lord Wickenden.

Chapter Seventeen

HIS SHORT, DARK hair was brushed into a careless “Brutus” style. His snowy white cravat intricately tied to flow elegantly over his figure-hugging black coat and silk knee breaches.

Gillie defied any lady not to look twice at such a fine, handsome man. But she was not prepared for the way her heart seemed to leap right into her throat, nor for the way his rather hard eyes quartered the room. He looked disdainful, but she suspected that was only because so many people looked at him.

Please be searching for me. Please...

It seemed he was. His eyes stopped immediately when they reached her, and he began to walk directly toward her. As couples began to dance or to rush onto the floor, he simply weaved between them, his gaze never leaving Gillie.

Rooted to the spot, she was aware of everyone’s attention turning from Wickenden to her, and yet she couldn’t care for any gaze but his. A few people tried to speak to him on his way past, but he didn’t appear to notice. He advanced relentlessly until he stood before her.

“Lilian,” he said to Mrs. Derwent, although he didn’t so much as glance at her. “Miss Muir. My waltz, I think.”

In that moment, Gillie had no idea whose waltz it was, except that it was not his. And yet, when he stretched out his hand, she laid hers in it and watched his strong fingers close around it. With all eyes upon her, she walked out onto the dance floor with him and was taken in his arms.

Only then did her held breath rush outward.

“I thought you’d gone,” she blurted.

“You still have no faith in me. Or is it in you?”

“In me,” she confessed with a flickering smile which seemed to be reflected in his eyes and on his lips. The lips which had kissed her with such passion.

“All is well with you?” he asked, his eyes searching her face.

“It is now.”

His eyes softened as they did so rarely. “Does that mean you’ve missed me?”

She nodded, since she couldn’t seem to speak.

“I missed you,” he murmured. “I’d show you how much if I wasn’t afraid of being blackballed.”

Laughter caught in her throat. "You've never been blackballed in your life."

"Not precisely, perhaps, though I have been kicked out of several establishments including schools, clubs, and a maharaja's palace. Blackhaven Assembly Rooms would be the pinnacle."

"How dare you mock us?"

"On the contrary, I'm complimenting you."

"Hmmm. Is everyone still watching us?"

"I don't know. I'm having difficulty looking anywhere but at you. How do you always contrive to be more beautiful than I remember?"

"It's probably the dress—or Isabella's comb."

"No it isn't, The urge to kiss you is becoming overwhelming."

So was the urge to let him, but if she said so, she was more than a little afraid he would actually do it. And she couldn't really allow that, not before she'd spoken to Aunt Margaret and Bernard...and then there was his sister.

"Oh, did you know Lady Rushton is here?"

"Who?"

"Your sister," she said dryly.

A smile flickered on his lips. "I know who she is. Did she come to look you over?"

"I fear she did."

"Kate must have blabbed. They're very thick."

"Well, everyone will be blabbing now. That's twice the man who doesn't dance has danced with me."

"That's true. One might have revived your reputation. Two will merely damage it. Don't worry. I have a plan."

She smiled. "You don't take convention seriously at all, do you?"

"Only some of it. The rest, I find as annoying as you do. Would you like to come away with me?"

Her breath caught. "Oh yes. Where would we go?"

"Scotland? Egypt? India? Or we could try to dodge the armies in Europe." He appeared to consider. "Maybe we should begin with Scotland. There are some beautiful, peaceful places up there we could while away a few weeks quite delightfully."

A certain darkening of his eyes told her exactly what he meant. Desire surged and she had to drop her gaze to his chest.

"Gillie, Gillie," he murmured with a hint of anguish amongst his amusement. "I love waltzing with you but I could wish all the rest of these people to the devil!"

"Even your own sister?" she teased.

"Especially my own sister."

"Oh, and you'll never guess who else is here," she exclaimed. "Miss Smallwood."

“Who is Miss Smallwood?”

“The girl you rescued from her elopement last night! I think Mrs. Derwent is keeping her near Kit to fend me off.”

“I trust it’s working?”

“Only up to a point. The poor child seems terrified of her. But her parents are waiting for her in the foyer. She didn’t seem terribly pleased...I wonder if she’s gone to them?”

“Are they seething with rage?”

“Not exactly,” Gillie said doubtfully. “To be honest, they don’t seem quite the thing. Quite odd parents for her to have for she’s very well spoken is she not? Although slightly silly.”

“Why should you think so? Apparently elopement can happen to the best of us.”

She couldn’t help the gurgle of laughter that escaped her. She’d never before encountered anyone who so disturbed her and soothed her at the same time. She could look at him again without the strange embarrassment that seemed to be at least half longing.

When the dance finally ended, she was sorry, for waltzing seemed to shut out the rest of the world, leaving only the music and her partner.

“Behaving with perfect courtesy, I shall escort you back to your aunt, and then there are a few people I need to speak to.”

“Your sister for one,” Gillie pointed out as she saw Lady Rushton seated again between the countess and Aunt Margaret.

“Wickenden,” his sister greeted him without obvious pleasure.

“Julia.” He didn’t even glance at his sister before greeting Aunt Margaret. The countess was deep in conversation with Mrs. Winslow, the squire’s wife.

At last, he sighed and met his sister’s gaze. “What brings you to Blackhaven?” he asked resignedly.

She raised her brows. “Waters. The quack told Rushton they’d give me a son.”

“Has the quack been to medical school?” Wickenden inquired.

Lady Rushton laughed. “You’d be surprised the qualities attributed to Blackhaven.”

“Oh I am. Constantly. You must excuse me.” He inclined his head to his sister, gave a quick, flashing smile to Gillie that invited her to share his humor, and then he strolled away again.

“Well,” Lady Rushton observed. “I’ll give my brother this much – he still surprises me.” She fixed her thoughtful gaze on Gillie. “I suppose you have been warned about him?”

Gillie couldn’t help the quick smile that broke on her lips, although she quickly hid it again. “By just about everyone, including him.”

“He won’t marry you,” Lady Rushton said flatly. “He never marries

any of 'em."

She lifted her chin. "I know."

"Do you, by God?" For some reason, her ladyship looked at her with deeper interest. "Lillian Derwent," she said, "believes you're flirting with my brother to make her son jealous."

"Mrs. Derwent," Gillie said flatly, "is obsessed with her son and may go the devil."

As soon as the words were out, she wished she could bite them back, but Lady Rushton appeared to share at least a sense of humor with her brother for she barked out a laugh.

"Why, so I think," she said cordially. "But she's desperate to snare that minx for him."

Gillie blinked. "What minx?"

"The little blonde girl. Smallwood or some such name? Apparently she's a huge heiress. Her father made a fortune out of mills, or some such, and brought his daughter up a lady."

Gillie's eyes widened. "Truly? Well, that explains a lot!"

"It does? Do tell."

Gillie opened her mouth and closed it again. "I can't. Not yet, anyway."

*

WICKENDEN, HAVING SPOKEN to a stunned Mr. Hoag and to Bernard Muir, left the ballroom to inspect the private room on the other side of the foyer. Apparently there were two, used for private meetings of the town corporation and various business interests, and by any other individuals prepared to rent them by the hour.

Mr. Hawthorne was not around to question as to which door was the correct one. So he simply opened the first and discovered it in use by a plump middle aged couple in hats and cloaks with a young girl in an ill-fitting ball gown who looked vaguely familiar. She appeared to be in tears.

"Oh why won't you believe me?" she sobbed.

Wickenden, with no desire to be involved in family quarrels of any kind, made to back out. "Excuse me."

However, he was too late for all three heads had turned toward him in surprise.

"Oh sir, thank God," the girl said, jumping to her feet. "Please will you tell my parents the truth of what occurred last night?"

"Oh for goodness sake," the father growled. "Why should I take the word of a stranger?"

"Because it's Lord Wickenden himself!" the girl exclaimed.

Only then did Wickenden recognize her. The eloping girl he'd

extracted from some bastard's clutches and foisted on to Kit Grantham. Gillie had told him that she and her parents were here. He hadn't cared much, except to hear the sound of Gillie's voice. He supposed some unhappiness was inevitable for her after what she'd done, but his main preoccupation at that moment was his own happiness.

He bowed to the girl and her parents. "Miss Smallwood, very happy to see you here. Pray forgive the interruption."

"Interruption! Interruption, sir?" the father exclaimed, knocking over his chair in his haste to rise. "My lord, you have interrupted the wellbeing, the very *life* of a young and innocent girl!"

"I have?" Wickenden glanced at Miss Smallwood for enlightenment. What web of a story had she spun her parents precisely?

"Father, I told you, it was not him!" Miss Smallwood exclaimed. "Look at him! He is a gentleman in every way, a baron! Why would he even consider eloping with *me*?"

So the girl was telling the truth but was not, apparently believed. Which meant that either he was the victim of his own reputation, or the parents were playing their own game. Under Wickenden's haughtiest gaze, the man reddened but drew himself up to his full height, which was not a great deal above five feet.

"Lord Wickenden," he intoned. "Do you deny you were alone in my daughter's company late last night, without my own or my wife's knowledge, let alone our consent?"

"Of course he doesn't," Miss Smallwood wailed, "I was! I asked him to save me from Mr. Tamms and he did! It was his – er – friend, Captain Grantham who brought me to Blackhaven and Mrs. Derwent who has been so kind and even let me come to this ball with her. Please let me go back to the ball."

"That would be best," Wickenden said hastily. "And then you, sir, and I may converse later."

"Later is not good enough when you have ruined my daughter!"

Wickenden curled his lip. "Your daughter is not ruined to my knowledge. And if she were, I could not take the credit."

"Credit!" exclaimed the outraged mother. "Credit! I'll give you all the credit you wish – and loudly! – if you do not make things right and marry my girl immediately!"

Wickenden smiled very faintly. That particular curl of his lip had been known to wither many a grown man from encroaching sycophants to lazy servants. "I'm sorry to inform you, ma'am, you are barking up quite the wrong tree. There is nothing you can say or do that will hurt me, only your daughter. Good evening."

He turned on his heel just as Mrs. Smallwood hurled herself in

front of him, slamming the door closed and flattening her back dramatically against it.

"You shall not leave here, my lord, without a commitment to marry my daughter!"

"On the contrary, if *you* wish to leave here of your own free will, get out of my way."

The woman hesitated, as if she knew he was more than capable of simply picking her up and moving her aside. She must, moreover, have been aware that any official authority would tear the parents' claims in pieces within five minutes, so she didn't want them involved. Unfortunately for her, there wasn't much more damage anyone could do to the wicked baron's reputation.

"Mother!" the girl pleaded in anguish.

With bad grace, she slithered out of the way, and Wickenden opened the door once more.

"There is no call to threaten my wife!" Mr. Smallwood threw at his back.

"I never threaten," Wickenden said coldly. "I merely inform." He stood to one side and against his better judgment, glanced into the room and found Miss Smallwood. "Do you wish to return to the ball or stay here?"

The girl's gaze flickered from one parent to the other. "I'm staying at the hotel with Mrs. Derwent," she almost whispered. "I'll return with you in the morning." And she all but bolted past Wickenden and across the foyer toward the ballroom.

Wickenden held the father's outraged gaze. "Don't," he warned, and closed the door on them.

In the room next door, he discovered Mr. Hawthorne laying out chairs in a semi-circle. He seemed in perfect agreement about the undesirability of the elder Smallwoods.

*

GILLIE WAS DANCING when Miss Smallwood rushed back into the ballroom looking extremely upset. She was about to go to her, dragging her partner with her, when Kit met the troubled girl and listened to her, frowning, then tucked her hand in his arm and patted it.

Well, Gillie thought. That would be an interesting turn in events... Although she rather thought Miss Smallwood too young to be marrying anyone just yet. After all, she'd only just eloped with a sleazy and not terribly plausible fortune hunter, only to leap voluntarily into the clutches of the wicked baron himself. She was clearly not a good judge of character. Or not always.

As the dance ended, Kit materialized by Gillie's elbow, politely detaching her from her partner.

"I've left Jenny – Miss Smallwood – with Bernard," he said without preamble. "But could I ask you to keep an eye on her? My mother scares her to death, but her own parents are here trying to force her into marriage with Wickenden!"

"Oh no," Gillie blurted, then, flushing slightly. "That is, I know that bird won't fly! Why Wickenden?"

"Because he's filthy rich, of course," Kit said bitterly.

"But so is she," Gillie said, frowning.

Kit blinked at her. "She is? Where did you hear that?"

"From Lady Rushton. Who had it, I believe, from your mother."

"Did she, by God?" Kit gazed thoughtfully across the room at his regal parent. "Well, I suppose that explains it. Only if they're loaded, why are the parents going after Wickenden? It can't be for their daughter's reputation."

"His title, I suppose. To have their daughter Baroness Wickenden."

"I'll just go and have a word with them," Kit said. "They won't succeed with the marriage, of course, but they can make their own daughter's life hell in pursuit of it!"

Braving Mrs. Derwent's wrath, Miss Smallwood actually allowed Bernard to bring her over to sit by Gillie for a while. After which, Bernard strolled off.

As expected, Miss Smallwood spilled her woes in whispers into Gillie's ear. Fortunately, there was only deaf Aunt Margaret close enough to overhear. In fact, after a few moments, even Aunt Margaret got up and wandered off, presumably to find more congenial company among her own friends.

"So embarrassing," Miss Smallwood whispered, "to see his lordship so accused and abused when he has shown me nothing but kindness!"

Something in her voice made Gillie's heart sink. Perhaps it was just because Lord Wickenden returned to the ballroom at that moment, and instead of coming straight to her as he had earlier, he walked over to Braithwaite. Bernard sat with them also. A moment later, he and Bernard lifted the earl and carried him out.

Gillie dragged her gaze back to the younger girl. "If they weren't pressing him, if they had never even come here...would you like to be married to Lord Wickenden?"

Miss Smallwood thought about it. "I would like to be a lady," she confessed. "Only I can't help thinking he would make a very... uncomfortable husband."

Gillie smiled faintly, unsure why she felt quite so relieved when she had no intention of marrying him herself. "I suspect he would."

A few minutes later, Lieutenant Green arrived to claim his dance

with Miss Smallwood, and Bernard, who'd just walked up to them didn't seem to mind.

"I say, Gillie, come with me. I've something very particular to show you."

"You have? What?"

"Come and see," Bernard said impatiently, drawing her to her feet. She walked with him across the floor. One of the gambling gentleman she recalled writing his name on her dance card approached, but Bernard fended him off. "Sorry, Gibley! Give me a few moments with m'sister!"

Mr. Gibley bowed good-naturedly and walked on. Tucking her hand into his arm, Bernard led her out of the ballroom and across the foyer.

"Where are we going?"

Mr. Hawthorne stood now at one of the meeting room doors.

"In there," Bernard said.

As they approached, the other door opened and Mr. and Mrs. Smallwood stuck their heads out. Quite unexpectedly, Mr. Hawthorne stepped smartly to the right and closed the door on them once more before all but leaping back to open the first.

It was so funny that Gillie almost laughed. But then she'd laughed a lot tonight, because Lord Wickenden was back and she was so happy.

"What in the world is in here?" Gillie demanded as they walked through the door together.

The first person she saw was Lord Wickenden standing at the front of the room with Mr. Hoag the vicar. Even more bizarrely, Aunt Margaret sat in one of the chairs that had been laid out as if for a meeting, along with Lady Rushton and Lord Braithwaite.

"Smile," Bernard said, grinning. "It's your wedding day."

Chapter Eighteen

“M-MY...MY WEDDING?” she stammered. “What do you mean?”

“To Lord Wickenden,” Mr. Hoag said, beaming. “I take it you are a willing partner in this marriage?”

Still bewildered, Gillie sought Lord Wickenden, who gave her a lopsided smile.

“But...but that can’t be right. How can we possibly be married?”

“Special license,” Bernard said cheerfully. “Lord Wickenden rode all the way to York just to extract one from the Archbishop himself!”

Gillie pulled free of her brother, holding the backs of both hands to her burning face. “Oh no, this is wrong! I can’t...” She swung around abruptly, and suddenly not Bernard but Wickenden himself was beside her.

“I beg your patience for five minutes,” he said to the room and then led her out, closing the door. In the empty foyer, he turned her gently to face him. “What’s the matter, Gillie? Don’t you want to marry me?”

“No! I told you, I will not—”

The door to the other meeting room snapped open and the Smallwoods spilled out.

“My lord,” Mr. Smallwood said with dignity, “this is your last chance before I tell this kind lady exactly how black your wicked heart is! Why, my daughter—”

“Be gone!” Wickenden thundered so hard that it seemed to blow Smallwood back against the wall. “Or I will have you both banged up in Blackhaven Gaol for months! Never imagine I don’t have that kind of power because you’ll soon find out I do!”

The Smallwoods fell over each other scrambling back into their own meeting room and slammed the door. In spite of everything, Gillie wanted to laugh.

Or perhaps it was tears trying to get out.

“Why is it,” Wickenden fumed, “that those people are so desperate to throw their poor, benighted daughter into my arms, and you won’t have me at any price?”

“Oh God, it’s not that I won’t have you,” Gillie pleaded, unable to stop the tear escaping from the corner of one eye. She slid her back down the wall and crouched, as if that could somehow hide it. “I just can’t marry you, David. I thought you understood.”

He crouched in front of her and relentlessly took both of her hands. "Gillie," he said softly. "My Gillie. I am not a good man. I've done many things I'm ashamed of. But what on earth makes you think that I would sacrifice the honor and the happiness of the woman I love to the supposed grandeur of my family?"

Gillie's mouth fell open. She tasted salt as the forgotten tear trickled in. Her fingers twisted, gripping his hands without her conscious volition.

He said, "Why would I marry a duke's daughter—or even a damned princess—now that I've met you?"

She stared at him. "The—the woman you l-love?" she repeated.

He smiled. "I told you that already. In the woods, as I recall. In fact, I can recall exactly what I was doing at the time."

So could Gillie, which was the problem. "I thought that was just the— um—passion speaking. I didn't know you meant it."

A breath of something that wasn't quite laughter hissed between his lips. He leaned nearer and kissed her mouth with great tenderness. "I never say anything I don't mean. Now, please, will you stand up and come inside and marry me?"

With a sob, she threw both arms around his neck and hugged him hard. "I will," she whispered, "I will."

And she did.

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About Mary Lancaster

Mary Lancaster's first love was historical fiction. Her other passions include coffee, chocolate, red wine and black and white films – simultaneously where possible. She hates housework.

As a direct consequence of the first love, she studied history at St. Andrews University. She now writes full time at her seaside home in Scotland, which she shares with her husband, three children and a small, crazy dog.

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